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## Brothers are better than sisters: A semiotic, feminist analysis of HBO's "Rome"

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BROTHERS ARE BETTER THAN SISTERS: A SEMIOTIC, FEMINIST ANALYSIS  
OF HBO'S ROME

by

Patricia Mamie Peers

Bachelor of Science  
Pittsburg State University  
May 2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for

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## ABSTRACT

### **Brothers are Better than Sisters: A Semiotic, Feminist Analysis of HBO's Rome**

By

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In 2005, the Home Box Office and British Broadcasting Corporation partnered to produce *Rome*, a television series that retells the Roman histories of Julius Caesar, Marc Antony and Augustus through the lives of two centurion soldiers, Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus. The show's producers endeavored to bring Roman streets to life and included more storylines of women, men and children of all classes. At first considered a more egalitarian approach to history, *Rome's* women are said to "challenge expectations" (Vu, 2005) and "forge a new path" (Ragalie, 2007, p. 2). But does this *new* representation challenge the *old*, sexist thinking that governed ancient Rome (and that continues to limit gender roles in modern society)? Or does it reify it?

This semiotic, feminist analysis of the HBO television series, *Rome*, asks how the show reifies and critiques patriarchal ideals. It compares the way brotherhood and sisterhood are framed through narrative and visual elements, like characterization, dialogue, plot, camera angle and color. The asexual, same-sex relationships between Pullo and Vorenus and Atia and Servilia are selected as signifiers of brotherhood and sisterhood. The difference in the portrayal of brotherhood and sisterhood illustrates ways that patriarchal ideals are articulated, and feminist ideals are oppressed, in popular culture representations. This thesis argues that even though *Rome's* producers claim to "set the

stage for modern politics—infighting, corruption," the *way* that they set the stage, ironically, critiques contemporary ideas about gender and endorses the base upon which the corruption is built—patriarchy. By critiquing *Rome*, this thesis contributes to feminist media studies scholarship by showing how patriarchy is portrayed in media and how those messages contribute to our perception of sexist politics.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction.” –bell hooks, 2000, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*

Julius Caesar unrolls Cleopatra from a rug. Cleopatra tumbles across the tile floor and lands facedown. Hair a mess, she casts a look of contempt in Caesar's direction and then clutches her low back in distress. Caesar laughs at her and then lifts the Egyptian princess to her feet. That was 1963, Twentieth Century Fox. In 2005, the Home Box Office (HBO) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) retell the story. This time, Cleopatra is placed on the floor, wrapped in linen. Everyone steps away. Cleopatra throws off the sack, sits up straight, wipes the dust off her arms, then swiftly turns to Caesar and offers her hand. Of these two versions of the same historical event, feminists may applaud the latter, aired as part of a dramatic television series *Rome*. It could be perceived as a more progressive representation, one that repositions Cleopatra as an independent, confident woman. *Rome's* women challenge expectations (Vu, 2005). They are on top in sex scenes, they discipline slaves as rigorously as the men, they participate in backstage political discussions, and they fight to increase their status. But does this *new* representation challenge the *old*, sexist thinking that governed ancient Rome and that continues to limit gender roles in our society?

This study asks: does *Rome* reify or critique patriarchal ideals? To determine how *Rome* frames patriarchy, this researcher conducts a semiotic analysis of the narrative and visual elements of brotherhood and sisterhood within the television series.

This thesis argues that, even though *Rome's* producers claim to “set the stage for

modern politics—infighting, corruption," the way that they set the stage, ironically, critiques feminism and endorses one pillar upon which the corruption is built—patriarchy. Although *Rome* recreates Roman civilization in a new way, most especially by creating complex narratives and visuals to depict the lesser-known lives of women and soldiers, it projects today's sexism into the past.

What follows is a description of the series, definitions of patriarchy, feminist theory and semiotics, a literature review regarding *Rome* and feminist media studies, and then an application of those concepts in a feminist, semiotic analysis of the show.

#### About HBO Rome

Aired on Sunday nights for two seasons, from August 2005 through March 2007, *Rome* is a dramatic series that depicts the fall of the Roman republic, as represented in the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the rise of Rome's empire, as represented in Augustus' defeat of Marc Antony. The historic narrative is tied together through the more dominant, master narrative, of two Roman soldiers, Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson) and Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd). Producer Jonathan Stamp describes Pullo and Vorenus' dramatized world as the A story, and the historical record as the B story (Episode 12, "Kalends of February," Audio Commentary, Season I). Audiences follow the two soldiers while Caesar fights Pompei and Brutus in Season I and while Brutus and Augustus fight Marc Antony for rule of Rome in Season II. While the men fight for the highest seats of Rome, women compete for power within their domesticated roles in the city. Women's struggles within all social classes are brought to life in female characters like patricians Atia (Polly Walker) and Servilia (Lindsay Duncan), plebians

Niobe (Indira Varma), and servants Eirene (Chiara Mastalli) and Gaia (Zuleikha Robinson).

Because of its subject matter and series format, *Rome* is often compared to *I, Claudius*, a 1977 teleplay broadcast on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), also sponsored by the BBC. *Rome* producer Anne Thomopoulos says, “I was always a fan of *I, Claudius*...[and, in *Rome*,] I set out to find a way to do *I, Claudius* in a more expansive way...the other idea was to see who would we be as individuals if we actually lived during those times. And, if you opened the doors to *I, Claudius*, what would be happening in the streets” (Bercaw, 2008). One way *Rome* accomplishes that goal is by eliminating narrative voiceovers (only the premier episode of the first season included a short voiceover). *I, Claudius* was told through the narrative point of view of the emperor who, through his voiceovers, was privileged to provide personal opinion regarding the affairs of all other characters on the show. Narrative voices create a persistent personality presence and, without it, *Rome* may seem more open, impartial (Richard Neupert, 1995 quoted in Southard, 2008, p. 155).

So even though *Rome* is about Roman history, it is not a documentary. It is a dramatized version of Roman history that vividly recreates lives of lesser-known Roman citizens in ways that attract today’s largest audiences. According to the Neilson ratings, the pilot attracted 8.9 million viewers over 11 broadcasts. *Rome* averaged an audience of two to three million viewers per episode. It was nominated for eight Emmy awards in 2006, and won four statuettes (Cyrino, 2008, p. 140). A movie critic for *Slant* magazine gave *Rome* four stars and encourages *I, Claudius* viewers, “history buffs (or those wanting to learn), and those just interested in violence and nudity to tune in”

(Neigher, 2005). Another critic calls *Rome* a “compelling, toga-clad soap opera” (Owen, 2007). Some critics, while praising many aspects of *Rome*, see it as “yet another commercial for empire building” (Leonard, 2005). And yet another summarizes it as an X-rated version of *I, Claudius* (Stanley, 2007). The show was cancelled earlier than planned due to the cost and logistics of shooting overseas (Two, 2006). The finale aired in the United States on March 25, 2007.

Co-funded by Home Box Office (HBO) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the first season cost over \$100 million to create, making it one of the more costly television programs to date. *Rome* mixes several genre formats. Freedom from primetime censorship permits more nudity than many former pop-culture representations of antiquity have afforded before, and cause critics to praise its soft-porn formula (Dittrich, 2007, p.164). Although there are enough bloody battle scenes to call it a sword-and-scandal, *Rome* includes only one battle that appears epic in scale. *Rome* was also recorded on cinema-quality film at Cinecitta studios, in Italy, where set details result in an authentic, gritty depiction of the empire. Orange, brown, and red colors replace what were white and gold in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Cleopatra*. *Rome*'s graphics, costumes, sets, script, talent, and cinematography reflect the investment of many of television's most talented artists.

*Rome*'s creators are mostly male. Of the 24 crew members, which includes executive producers, directors, writers, and one historical consultant, two (8%) were women (HBO-Rome Official Crew website). It is relevant, then, to consider the male gaze, “the idea that when we look at images in art or on screen, we're seeing them as a man might—even if we are women—because those images are constructed to be seen

by men” (Zeisler, 2008, p. 8). The male gaze was developed by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and was later defined as “the privileging of male vision, an authoritative, overpowering gaze” (Mulvey, 1989 as cited in Hopkins, 2000, p. 45). *Rome*’s female characters, while strong, may reflect the male gaze. As one video blogger, Smischell, explained to his YouTube fans, there are four reasons to watch *Rome*, “1) Boobs, 2) Violence, 3) Politics and 4) Boobs.”

### About Patriarchy

A popular blend of violence, sex and politics, *Rome*’s producers bring many characters from all social classes to life, but they do so in consideration of the patriarchal politics that governed Roman civilization at that time, and in consideration of how today’s audiences, who have been influenced by the feminist movement, will receive its representation of history. This study is concerned with how patriarchy is framed in *Rome*. As such, it is important to define patriarchy and the movement that calls for the end of it, feminism.

bell hooks, activist and academic, writes and speaks about gender and class issues in culture. This study adopts hooks’ interpretation of feminist theory as the basis from which to analyze *Rome*. She defines patriarchy as a “political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, 2004). She describes America’s political system as “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2000, 2004). hooks envisions a world

“where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction” (2000, p. xi).

To support her vision, hooks dissects diverse attributes of popular culture representations and extends analysis beyond the characterization of white women to examine men, minorities, and children. Her analyses illustrate the ways patriarchal thinking permeates, and harms, everybody.

One may argue that sexism and sexist societies are not as problematic as feminists make them out to be, that hooks is radical. But patriarchy continues to limit possibilities for women, men and children. As part of this system, according to the World Health Organization, “society prescribes to women and men different roles in different social contexts” which results in “differences in the opportunities and resources available to women and men, and in their ability to make decisions and exercise their human rights” (2002). Conformity to socially constructed gender roles leads to gender-related health problems. For example, gay men are twice as likely to commit suicide as their heterosexual counterparts; women are less likely to enroll in cardiac rehab programs; men do not seek professional help for depression until symptoms become severe (Gender and Health Collaborative Curriculum, 2009). Women and men also suffer from gender-related incidents, which negatively impact their psychological well-being (Smith et al., 2001, p. 51). Even though privileged women may hold powerful positions, or make more money than men, it is not the norm. On average women are paid 76 cents for every dollar men are paid (NOW). In one study, female managers were paid less than male managers in all ten industries included in the report in both 1995 and 2000 (NOW).

It can be inferred from the research above that sexism and sexist oppression is harmful to our health and basic human rights. Sexism creates inequities that are difficult to overcome. The inequities benefit some groups while crippling others. This hierarchal system of male domination is called patriarchy. Patriarchal ideology governed Rome, as well. Rome “saw no point in recording the lives of women, because no one would be interested in reading about them...the Romans believed that all women, whatever their age or status, were characterized by certain traits: a feeble intellect, weakness of character, and overall, a general incapacity innate in the female sex” (Frashetti, 2001, p. 2-3). This study examines how patriarchal ideology is framed in *Rome*, from a feminist perspective.

#### Feminism, Media, Brotherhood & Sisterhood

Feminism is a movement to end patriarchy (hooks, 2002). As the movement has changed overtime, so has its name; it has been qualified as liberal and radical feminism, post-feminism and third-wave feminism. In her succinct summary *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1). According to hooks, feminism is not about wanting what men have (gender equality) or about hating men. It is a movement to end sexist oppression that limits choices for men and women and children. In order to end sexist oppression, feminists should expose sexism through consciousness-raising, which is one reason for this study of *Rome*. In the early 1970s, feminists created consciousness-raising groups, which were hosted in easily accessible locations and used language many women could understand. When feminism moved into colleges and

universities, the consciousness-raising groups became less accessible. Also, the language used to describe feminism and feminist theory became more difficult to understand, laden with jargon and confused by backlash media coverage (Faludi, 1991; Dow, 1996). For those reasons, exposing sexism in everyday experiences remains a critical component of the feminist movement. Magazines like *Ms.*, *Bust*, and *Bitch* are dedicated to this cause. *Bitch's* editor, Andy Zeisler, advocates for this work because, "Pop culture, entertainment or not, is absolutely crucial to how people understand and live in the world" (p. 3). Analyses of popular media productions, like *Rome*, are of particular importance. Narrative and visual elements manage expectations and frame audience perceptions. They affect how we see our selves and how others see us. They render oppressed groups invisible (hooks, 1995; Brasfield, 2007; Young, 2006; Dow, 1996; Faludi, 1991). Feminist Janice Raymond (1986) wrote, "The invisibility of women to each other has been the condition of women in a hetero-relational society [a society structured around the idea that women's purpose is to live for men] and affects women's total loss of sensation for their selves and other women." (cited by Aune, 2003). When the dominant culture *does* portray oppressed groups, it stereotypes them. For example, women are good with children, Indians are alcoholics, Hawaiians are late (Young, 2006). When we avoid critiquing those representations, we risk internalizing the oppression (Brasfield, 2007). *Rome* spent a great deal of money on scripts, costumes and set designs that make women visible. This study is concerned with *how* those narrative and visual elements frame women who are not bound by historical records.

An important part of the feminist movement is to create "a foundation of solidarity between women" (hooks, 2000, p. 14). And while that goal is clear, literature regarding

relationships among women reflects the diversity of feminist ideology. hooks claims women have been socialized to see themselves as “only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred” (hooks, 2000, p. 14). Women are taught to value relationships with men and to mistrust relationships with one another (Aune, 2003; hooks, 2000). Male bonding, on the other hand, has been described as “an accepted and affirmed aspect of patriarchal culture...men in groups would stick together, support one another, be team players, place the good of the group over individual gain and recognition” (p. 14). Indeed, analysis of movie statistics reveals that women are underrepresented as leads, and that mostly male-male leads dominate the big screen (Greven, 2009; Stewart, 2008; Monroe, 2009). Only two of the 100 biggest movies released between 2004 and 2009 billed two female characters as leads (these were *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Scary Movie 4*). On October 30, 2009, Wikipedia writers associated 289 film titles under the category of male buddy film, whereas only 80 films were categorized as female buddy films. As the anecdotal statistics suggest, men and male friendships may be depicted more often in popular culture. Although *Rome* chose to center the story on two male soldiers, and therefore follows the male buddy film tradition, it also includes several female relationships in the series.

As a contrast to these arguments, Davis (2006) claims blues lyrics recorded by female artists in the 1920s provide a glimpse at a working-class woman’s perspective by not downplaying female antagonism and by proclaiming women’s complexity. As an example, Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey’s song, “Wringing and Twisting Blues,” expresses jealousy, competitiveness and violence:

But if I find that gal  
That tried to steal my pal  
I'll get her told, just you wait and see  
St. Louis gal, I'm gonna handle you  
I said manhandle you (p. 434)

These lyrics give voice to the experiences of working class women who are often silenced and oppressed by bourgeois feminists. Certainly, antagonism is a part of human nature, but more research may be necessary to determine whether or not women are socialized to mistrust each other. The goal of this essay is not to validate such general and conflicting claims, but to explore these concepts in a feminist analysis of female friendships as compared to male friendships in *Rome*.

Brotherhood is consistently employed as a trope for masculinity (Clarke, 2006; Greven, 2009; Man, 1993; Stewart, 2008; Monroe, 2008). It is probably best reflected in the buddy film genre which depicts two male protagonists who squabble but also compliment each other nicely. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Wayne's World* (1992), and *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) are several popular buddy films. This format is frequently used in post-war films that seek to reify patriarchal and imperialist cultures. For example, Clarke (2006) explains:

*We Were Soldiers* (Wallace 2002) and *Tigerland* (Schumacher, 2000) valorize brotherhood and the idea that men are natural leaders and brothers in war, the ideal heroes. These films were released in 1986, just after a flourish of films reflected the disillusionment of the Vietnam War. These films use 'traditionally WWII narrative patterns and tropes, such as the brotherhood of soldiers,' which reifies traditional views of masculinity (p. 25).

Brotherhood has also been used as a trope in advertising. A socio-semiotic analysis of Big Brothers' printed advertisements (from the early 1900s to 1990s) uncovers ways that their campaigns to solicit volunteers have changed and reflect the "uneasy place" of

the fraternal organization within our modern patriarchal society (Hopkins, 2000, p. 29). Slogans and imagery up until the 1980s depicted a serious, traditional man in the symbolic roles of King, Warrior, Athlete, Buddy, and Magician, shaping the future of an at-risk little brother. Market research revealed that this imagery scared away the men the ads were designed to attract. The imagery represented unrealistic masculinity. Volunteers dropped. Once Big Brothers launched a friendlier “It’s kid stuff” campaign (featuring one smiling boy on the poster), the volunteer base grew for the first time in five years (p. 49). Hopkins urges readers to critically examine fraternal organizations, partly because their “slogans, icons, and their connoted gender-myths...are part of the larger cultural systems of...racism, religion, class, and consumerism,” but also because, by their very existence, “may help to perpetuate gender inequality by insisting on gender difference” (p. 50-51). Despite its drawbacks, the buddy film has been adopted by producers who create female buddy films which may reflect positive notions of sisterhood, even if they perpetuate gender difference myths.

*Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), and *Walking and Talking* (1996) have been categorized as female buddy films. *Thelma & Louise* (1992) may be considered one of the most popular examples. Glenn Man (1993) describes the symbolism of the final scene of *Thelma and Louise* as they speed their Thunderbird into the Grand Canyon, on a suicide mission:

A sign of the women's discrete agency apart from that associated with men is their bonding in a sisterhood that offers an alternative to their former male-centered lives...The women's symbolic marriage before driving off the edge of the canyon (their kiss, their clasped hands) seals their relationship off from the heterosexual conventions of their former lives (p. 41-45).

The camaraderie of the two women throughout the film is admirable and that final image of them sailing over the edge of the Grand Canyon as the screen fades to white (as opposed to black) is oddly promising. While Man (1993) applauds their sisterly relationship, he critiques their Pyrrhic victory, their win at too great a loss:

Thelma and Louise triumph and they do not. They construct a new authenticity through individual choice, but they cannot maintain and foster it in the available environment. The women are not allowed, finally, to realize their newfound identities within life itself. The extreme closeups of their faces before their plunge do privilege them as agents in their moment of choice, but the closeups also support the containment-in-living that the rigid rank and file behind them suggests. Living entails defeat at worst, compromise at best. Ironically, the women's most privileged moment of agency involves the decision to obliterate subjectivity. Extinction of the self follows upon an act based on a heightened awareness of individual selfworth. The women's existential victory is not hollow, but because it is transcendent, it fails to resolve the tension between inner desire and the environment. The women escape the conflict; they do not overcome it. (p. 48).

So while *Thelma and Louise* emphasizes female friendship, it cannot “escape certain conventions and contradictions that qualify and complicate its bold fling at an authentic female discourse” (Man, 1993, p. 37-38). Like Man’s (1993) analysis of *Thelma and Louise*, this study focuses on female friendships, and their fates.

Positive relationships exist among women in television as well, but they are also complicated. For example, Southard (2008) applauds the narrative elements of *Sex and The City*. Through dialogue amongst female friends, the narrative voice of the show’s star character, the storylines and denouement, *Sex and The City* presents the complexities of feminist struggles. *Sex and The City* “challenges television’s postfeminist shows that feature characters who cannot manage to be both an individual and a member of a larger group, to be both feminist and feminine, and be both bold and vulnerable” (p. 164). *Rome*’s women certainly appear to be multidimensional as well.

For example, Atia dishes witty verbal lashings to many men and women, but she also quietly crawls into bed to hug her daughter when she returns home after an extended fit of rebellion.

As another television example, *Cagney & Lacey's* (1982-1988) main characters, Christine and Mary Beth, are supportive friends. They work together and help each other out. Alcock & Robson (1990) argue, though, that the two female leads contrast each other as the non-traditional and traditional woman (Alcock & Robson, 1990). Christine is single; she is characterized as a woman who wants to be a man; her mannerisms, dress, and language align her more closely with the male buddy system than the female buddy system, and she is lost because of it. On the other hand, Mary Beth follows a more traditional path as mother and wife, and is depicted as the more stable of the two. When Christine becomes a drunk, only Mary Beth can save her friend. In this way, their relationship mimics a mother/daughter relationship and also reinforces the traditional mother as the more acceptable form of femininity. So while Christine and Mary Beth support each other, their friendship is framed in such a way as to support patriarchal ideology (Alcock & Robson, 1990). Thus it is important for feminists to analyze the quality and nature of depictions, not just quantity. This analysis of *Rome* contributes to critical, feminist media studies literature through a semiotic analysis of the way relationships among males, and relationships among females, are framed through narrative and visual elements.

## Semiotics

This study uses semiotics to examine how cultural codes support or critique

patriarchal ideology by contrasting the way that brotherhood and sisterhood are framed through narrative and visual elements. Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is conveyed in texts; it is the science of signs and is considered the “queen of interpretive sciences” (Berger, 1982, p. 14-18). Semiotics is qualitative and focuses “on the system of signs that make up a text” (17). It “reveals the structures that produce meaning” (p. 17). Semiotics examines “the complex interplay of the literal elements of a text (termed denotations), and how these work through shared (or cultural) understanding to produce *connotations*, which are the second level of a reader’s understanding of the meaning of a (linguistic, pictorial, or textual) sign” (Quinn, 2009, p. 145). This interplay requires and also produces *cultural knowledge* (145). *Cultural knowledge* includes *myths*, “which are sets of signs and stories through which culture operates to create a seemingly natural understanding of ways of being” (p. 145). It is through those myths that culture “renders invisible its own norms and ideology” (Penn quoted in Quinn, 2009, p. 145).

Semiotics was selected over content analysis for this study because content analysis has been criticized as head-counting, which meets demands for *incorporation* of women into media, but does not account for *transformation* (Jaddou & Williams, 1981). Rather than focus on the quantity of representations, this analysis examines the quality of *Rome’s* representations to determine how narrative and visual elements frame patriarchy through the representation of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Feminists typically do not like to speak in terms of dichotomies like brotherhood and sisterhood because, “Any kind of stratification fortifies gender divisions and inequity because all power structures give legitimacy to the idea of dominance and

subordination” (Toscano, 2008, p. 161). However, semiotics assumes signs are relational and have meaning because their “basic relationship is oppositional” (Saussure, 1966 quoted in Berger, 1982, p. 18). For example, we do not know what rich means, if there is not a poor. We do not know what hard means unless there is a soft. So it is not the “content that determines meaning, but relations in some kind of system” (p. 18). This concept is important to this study because, although feminists consider binary thinking (black, white; good, bad) part of hegemonic societies, binary oppositions create meaning in culture. Binary oppositions are especially important for this study because oppositions structure *Rome’s* narrative. *Rome’s* producers describe the show as “an intimate drama of love and betrayal, masters and slaves, and husbands and wives” (HBO website). This semiotic analysis of brotherhood and sisterhood examines how those oppositions are framed through narrative and visual elements to determine how *Rome* supports and critiques patriarchal ideology.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

John Fiske describes popular culture as “progressive, not radical” and says “its progressiveness is concerned with redistributing power within these structures toward the disempowered; it attempts to enlarge the space within which bottom-up power has to operate. It does not, as does radicalism, try to change the system that distributes that power in the first place” (Johnson, 2007, p. 5). Even though *Rome*, then, may not be radical, this feminist critical study asks how this cultural text challenges or supports patriarchy. It is a means to open dialogue about feminist issues and to raise our collective consciousness. It is through this type of study that our society may envision a different reality—one not dominated by sexism. Following is a review of general studies of Rome in popular culture and then feminist media studies relevant to *Rome*.

Roman history has been appropriated by “diverse groups at different historical moments for various ends—most especially, for debates, explicit and implicit about politics and sexuality” (Joshel, Malamud & Wyke, 1995, p. 2). *Rome* follows this trend and claims to “set the stage for modern politics,” and therefore marks itself as a valuable, popular artifact to examine from a feminist perspective.

With two to three million viewers per episode, and significant online discussion about the show, *Rome* has opened worldwide dialogue about gender that may influence our cultural perspectives not only about history, but also about our times, and particularly America. Rome remains, “the most important historical model through which the US views itself” and its historic figures “provide models both to emulate and to avoid” (Williams, 1996, p. 349). Americans view the Romans as either a model for

democracy or a model for imperialism. For example, colonists consulted Cicero to develop the basis for a democratic government and John Adams warned of how ambitious men destroyed the wisest republic (p. 349).

Many communication and media scholars recognize the cultural significance of Rome and examine representations of antiquity in media (Joshel, Malamud, & Wyke, 1995; Cyrino, 2008; Dittrich, 2007; Malamud, 2001; Mayer, 1994; Ragalie, 2007; Solomon, 2001; Winkler, 1995). Mayer (1994) describes the play, *Ben-Hur* (1899-1902), as a representation of America, where “disparate cultures rub shoulders, it is a new holy land where the solution to harmony is not contention and rebellion (another civil war), but tolerance, democracy or Christianity” (p. 190). *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) reflects the political climate in America after World War—the rise of Rome, the rise of American power, and thus “evokes the social and political atmosphere of the time portrayed: imposing the beauty of Rome, the power of its empire, and the eventual destruction of both” (Winkler, 1995, p. 139-141). A little over ten years after *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) aired *I, Claudius* (1977), a novel turned teleplay, depicting Roman history through the perspective of Claudius, a sickly Roman emperor. It aired shortly after Watergate, the resignation of President Richard Nixon in August of 1974, and in the midst of scandals in the White House. The 1970s “appeared to be the culmination of a dramatic coming apart of American power abroad, American society at home, and a masculine maintenance of power” (Joshel, 1995, p. 128). *I, Claudius* reiterated those problems on prime-time television.

The evolutionary representations of Rome reflect, and participate in the construction of, modern culture. These representations are especially important for feminists because their subject matter is a society governed by sexist politics. It is useful to examine how *Rome*'s producers recast patriarchal issues within our modern setting.

#### Men, Women, Their Relationships & Rome

Communication and history scholars examine *Rome*'s treatment of gender, citing many ways that it transcends traditional gender boundaries (Cyrino, 2008). For example, Toscano (2008) asserts that *Rome* blurs gender boundaries through its use of gowns and gossip. Vorenus' clothing reflects his ascendance up Rome's social ladder. Whereas vanity is typically associated with femininity, the camera looks up to Vorenus as he admires his toga-clad image in the mirror, which signifies his rise in rank to magistrate from soldier. Also, Pullo insults Vorenus' white toga and associates it with his friend's shift in politics to support corrupt government. Later in the first season, Vorenus tells his daughter that fashionable clothing marks an individual as cared for and therefore indicates social status. *Rome*, then, elevates the importance of fashion and extends its reach beyond the feminine world (Toscano, 2008).

Most television shows are not as progressive. A semiotic analysis of *Sex and the City* demonstrates how fashion, as a form of communication, plays an important role within contemporary society, specifically media (Kuruc, 2008). Fashion essentially becomes its own character on the show and it is "instrumental in perpetuating certain gender stereotypes" (p. 231). For example, Samantha, the eldest character on the show, is the stereotypical "cougar." She dresses like a "slut" and her clothing style does not

change throughout the *Sex and The City's* many seasons. When Samantha develops breast cancer, her greatest concern is finding a wig that matches her outfit. This materialistic characterization, as emphasized through concern with fashion, trivializes the severity of Samantha's medical situation. Kuruc's analysis shows how progressive character development is aided and restricted by fashion.

As another example, Busch (2008) uses semiotics in a feminist analysis of *What Not to Wear*, a television show aired on TLC (originally an acronym for The Learning Channel). Each week, stylists make-over professional women who (according to the friends and family) dress too frumpy, wild, or sexy for their age. After an analysis of the systems of signs, which include dialogue, imagery, and narrative elements, Busch argues that the "stylish workplace attire promoted on [the show] functions as a connotative sign in the larger hegemonic system of the American fashion culture, thereby, perpetuating the dominant ideology that requires women to dress fashionably, in order to achieve success, status, power, and credibility in the workplace" (p. 3). *What Not to Wear* causes many women to "passively accept the superficial ideology that requires them to dress fashionably in order to achieve success and status in the workplace as an inevitable and unchanging necessity of feminine life" (p. 3). In *Rome*, women *and* men are concerned about appearances and recognize clothing as an important sign of class and power (Toscano, 2008). *Rome's* treatment of fashion, then, may be considered more progressive because it locates fashion as a concern of both genders. However, as semiotic studies of fashion outside of the *Rome* literature suggests, emphasis on fashion, in general, encourages the "hegemonic, mainstream American culture that privileges physical appearance over substance" (Busch, 2008, p.

3). One could argue that *Rome* is simply passing hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies from one gender to the other. Yes, this blurs gender boundaries, but it does not support contemporary feminist views.

Seo (2008) argues that *Rome* has “marginalized historical features of patriarchal gender segregation” by presenting forceful female protagonists. However, *Rome* balances these “historical incongruities” by segregating religious events (p. 172). Whereas male ceremonies in the series are public, female ceremonies are private. For example, Caesar paints his face “at the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus,” whereas Servilia privately curses Caesar with tablets, and Niobe privately analyzes anomalies in animal entrails to predict future events (p. 169). One of the most remarkable scenes is when Atia is “showered with the blood of a dying bull as body-painted head dressed priests in loincloths chant and gambol around the sacrifice” (p. 171). The liberties *Rome* takes with depictions of religious practices and gendered roles are often used to create more round characters with which audiences can identify. Several scenes depict men who reflect and think privately. When Pullo and Vorenus pray, viewers may appreciate the private emotional expression of the two soldiers that otherwise would have been difficult to portray.

Although Seo (2008) acknowledges forceful female characters, these characters may not support feminist ideology, as the following research suggests. Shows with strong female leads often reflect backlash to the feminist movement. One way that media undermines feminist objectives is by placing focus on “*self*-transformation rather than *social* transformation” (from Deborah Rhode, 1995, quoted by Southard, 2008, p. 154). For example, Dow (1996) claims that *Murphy Brown* deflects attention away from the

system of male dominance and resells it as an individual female problem. *Murphy Brown* suggests that “rugged individualism” on behalf of “exceptional women whose lives are privileged by education, race and class may succeed professionally but also suffer personally to achieve a liberal feminist dream” (Dow, p. 161). Viewers are encouraged to overlook the “profound inequalities that burden women who are not like Murphy Brown” (p. 161). *Murphy Brown* has “no genuine feminist politics of its own, no sense that women’s problems can be understood not as symptoms of individual failure but as symptoms of oppression by a system of male dominance” (p. 161). Dow defines this type of depiction as postfeminist. Postfeminist rhetoric “dismisses the fundamental insight of feminist ideology: Women operate within a sex/gender system that limits acceptable choices” (p. 96). *Murphy Brown* emphasizes a woman’s choice, which presumes that all women have equal rights to choose. When, in reality, white, middle-class, heterosexual women like Murphy have more choices than poor women and women of color. Worse, Murphy is unhappy because of her choice. She decides to pursue a career rather than motherhood and is lonely because of it. This portrayal reinforces the patriarchal ideology that the problems women face are a result of their choices rather than the “result of the lack of support for those choices from government, employers, partners, etc” (p. 95). Like *Murphy Brown*, *Rome’s* female characters make choices. The nature and fate of their choices, as compared to men who exercise the same rights, reify patriarchy.

Engstrom (2009) identifies a similar, problematic issue with the characterization of women in the reality television program, *Bridezilla*. With brides as star characters, audiences may presume the show empowers women. Engstrom applies Goffman’s

theory of dramaturgy to analyze the characterization of brides on the show who demand perfection from family members and vendors in order to prepare for the perfect wedding day. Engstrom argues that the show further demarcates gender roles and stereotypes because it reemphasizes the myth that weddings and their consumerist desires remain within the female sphere. Also, by focusing on the backstage outbursts of the brides, and not on the men, the show reinforces “stereotypes of the hysterical woman and the calm, in control man” (p. 11). She explains, “The inclusion of backstage scenes where brides cry, scream, and complain humanizes these characters and yet creates an image of not only stressed-out brides but of women in general as being immature, out of control, and most important, not men.” *Bridezilla* “demeans” women (p. 11). This stereotype of “women as emotional reservoirs, men as intellectual leaders” was used to defeat the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment, which Solomon (1983) describes as a Pyrrhic victory. The ERA opponents may have succeeded in defeating the ERA, but they did so by straitjacketing individuals and relegating women into second class citizens, when, in reality the psychological, emotional and physical similarities between the sexes are much more congruent than their rhetoric suggests (Solomon, 1983, p. 115). This study shows how *Rome* depicts women as “emotional reservoirs, men as intellectual leaders.”

Academic literature suggests that *Rome*, and its popular culture predecessors, reference and perpetuate negative stereotypes of the most sexually and politically active women in Rome (Ragalie, 2007; Cyrino, 2008, Solomon, 2008). Although Roman historians often dramatized women’s behaviors to mirror civil unrest and corruption in Rome, Atia and Servilia were not portrayed as “sexually voracious or manipulative, as

they are in *Rome*” (Ragalie, 2007, p. 5). The characterization of Atia and Servilia is similar to the characterization of Livia, in *I, Claudius* who “set the standard for future femmes fatales in ancient settings” (Solomon, 2008, p. 17). Livia is “corrupt, lustful, and produce[s] familial disorder” (Joshel, Malamud, & Wyke, 1995, p. 16). *Rome*’s director and historical consultant claim to base Atia less on historical records and more on other Roman women, such as Clodia Metelli, a woman accused of poisoning her husband (Ragalie, 2007; Cyrino 2008). Atia’s character may also be based on Fulvia, wife of Marc Antony, and “one of the best known of the politically active elite women of the late Roman Republic” (Cyrino, 2008, p. 139).

Many cultural artifacts have influenced the characterization of Atia, Servilia, Pullo and Vorenus. This study examines how *Rome* creatively frames these characters and their relationships through a semiotic analysis of narrative and visual elements.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

The purpose of the study is to answer the research question: does *Rome* reify or critique patriarchal ideals? To determine how *Rome*'s producers frame patriarchy, this study employs semiotics to analyze the narrative and visual elements of brotherhood and sisterhood within the television series.

To plan the structure of this analysis, the researcher viewed the first and second seasons of *Rome* as they debuted on HBO, and then watched both seasons several times with audio commentary voiceovers and historical notes provided on-screen as special features on each DVD. The researcher also read scholarly and popular reviews of *Rome* as well as audience reviews of the show that were posted in response to YouTube video clips. Immersion in *Rome* content permitted several scenes and characters to rise to the surface as valuable signifiers of the cultural codes that were popular among audiences.

To assess how *Rome* treats brotherhood and sisterhood, this study compares the representations of two relationships, the most dominant relationship between men (Titus Pullo, played by Ray Stevenson, and Lucius Vorenus, played by Kevin McKidd) and the most dominant relationship between women (Atia of the Julii, played by Polly Walker, and Servilia of the Junii, played by Lindsay Duncan). While there are many relationships to choose from, these two same-sex relationships persist through both seasons. One could argue that Caesar and Brutus maintain a brotherly relationship, but Servilia brokers their relationship. When Brutus turns against Caesar, it is because his mother asks him to. Timon and his brother, Levi, could also represent brotherhood but they are actually family, not friends. Their relationship is guided by their familial

heritage and would be fascinating to explore in another study. Pullo and Vorenus are the heroes of the show and their friendship is an obvious representation of brotherhood. Atia and Servilia's relationship, on the other hand, is destructive. They are enemies. So avid fans may argue that this study is biased because it selects a less positive female relationship. Perhaps Jocasta and Octavia's friendship should be used instead because theirs is a more positive relationship; but their interactions, like other female relationships in the series, are brief, infrequent, and ancillary to *Rome*'s master narrative. Also, they are not frequently referenced in scholarly or popular reviews and audience comments. Atia and Servilia's relationship, on the other hand, is definitively established in several ways, one of which is in the character descriptions on HBO's Cast & Crew website. Servilia is described as "sophisticated, elegant, and subtle, she considers herself several rungs above Atia in the social hierarchy, a fact that chafes Atia." And Atia is described as "one of the shadow rulers of Rome." Thus the relationships between Atia and Servilia, and Pullo and Vorenus, remain the most dominant ones in *Rome* and are the focus of this study.

Their stories are creatively developed through signs. While there are many signs contained in television, this study focuses on two—narrative and visuals. Below is a description of each as they relate to this study.

#### Narrative

Narrative signs examined in this study include setting, character, plot, and structure (Piano). Setting is defined as the time, place, mood and atmosphere of events. *Rome* takes a unique approach to setting by emphasizing the streets and citizens of all social

classes. Characters are the “who” of a story and they are developed through dialogue, actions, costuming, and staging. Characters represent values, beliefs and ideas. Conflict is the problem in a story and plot shows how those conflicts are developed and resolved (Piano). This study examines the circumstances that motivate conflict, internal or external, and also the way those conflicts are resolved. For example, it examines the nature of a character’s goals, whether or not those goals are achieved, and how. Plot is influenced by the structure of the narrative. For example, flashbacks and interlocking narratives may emphasize the importance of an event. Also, open and closed endings (which are communicated through narrative and production techniques) may indicate a thematic perspective. This study analyzes how narrative elements characterize brotherhood and sisterhood and signify meanings related to patriarchal ideology.

## Visuals

Like all television productions, *Rome*’s narrative elements are contained within a two-dimensional communication medium where production techniques are used to transmit messages, and not impartial ones. Research suggests the “communicative ability of any television narrative is, in large part, a function of the production techniques utilized in its creation” (Barker, 1985, p. 235). Production techniques relevant to this study are field of view, camera angle and movement, editing, and color, all of which convey messages that affect perceptions and carry meanings (Kidd, 1998; Zettl, 1983; Welch et al., 1979). These production techniques are outlined below.

The camera’s distance, positioning and movement are important because “the camera has a point of view; it becomes a viewer” (Jamieson & Campbell as cited in

Kidd, 1998). The field of view defines the distance between the camera and subject. It “matches interpersonal distances” (Kidd, 1998). For example, audiences are less involved with characters who are further away in a long shot, which is a full shot of a scene or person sitting or standing (Kidd, 1998). Likewise, audiences are emotionally close to characters who are physically closer to the camera, as they are in close up shots, where the camera conveys a characters’ head and shoulders (Kidd, 1998).

In addition to field of view, the camera’s angle influences audience perceptions. Zettl (1983) claims, “Physical elevation has strong psychological implications. It immediately distinguishes between inferior and superior, between leader and follower, between those who have power and authority and those who have not” (p. 227). In television and film, this translates into, “when we look up with the camera, the object or event seems more important, more powerful, more authoritative than when we look at it straight on or even look down on it...when we look down with the camera, the object usually loses somewhat in significance; it becomes less powerful, less important, than when we look at it straight” (p. 227). An even more suggestive method is to use the “subjective camera,” which “means that the camera no longer simply looks at an event but participates in it. The camera assumes the point of view of a person with whom the viewer should ultimately identify” (p. 241). Camera movement also influences audience perception because it communicates how audiences should become involved in a story. When the camera moves forward, audiences begin to “anticipate, seek, hunt, and expect” whereas if the camera retreats, it “de-emphasizes the subject matter and induces isolation, loneliness and abandonment...depending on the content, such use of

the camera can help to create a shrinking revulsion, a feeling of disgust” (Manoogian, 1966, p. 188 quoted in Kidd, 1998).

The images presented on camera are dictated by editing, which also conveys how audiences should perceive the subject. For example, slow motion footage conveys tenderness and romance whereas jumpy images dramatize a situation (Jamieson & Campbell, 1983 as cited in Kidd, 1998). Also, cuts, or instantaneous changes from one image to another, can be used to prolong audiences’ attention to a scene.

In addition to camera point of view and editing, color influences perception (p. 75). Colors create aesthetic energy and influence audience judgment of temperature, time, weight, and space (Kidd, 1998). Red colors are warm and blue colors are cold, small and contracting; blues appear further away, and lighter. We perceive time to be short when blue colors are used (Zettl, 1983, p. 69-70). Colors are influenced by history and tradition. Kling and McConkey (1982) claim that tradition associates commonplace meaning with primary colors; for example, red is exciting; green is associated with life, jealousy, immaturity; blue symbolizes cool, melancholy, calm (as cited in Kidd, 1998). Similarly, light colors suggest innocence and youth while browns symbolize the earth and soil (Feininger, 1973 as cited in Kidd, 1998). This study analyzes the way *Rome* uses color to convey meaning and influence audience perception.

Tables in the analysis section compare and contrast these narrative and visual elements of brotherhood and sisterhood portrayals. Each table is followed by a discussion of those elements to show how they frame patriarchal ideology. This semiotic analysis of the narrative and visual elements used to represent same-sex,

asexual relationships in *Rome* demonstrates that its producers chose to reify patriarchy rather than critique it.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

*Rome* is an open text; it is produced to appeal to many audiences. Therefore, its audiences may interpret the show in many different ways. The following analysis reflects the critical thought of one feminist and considers the theory outlined by several feminists before her. It does not represent the readings of all viewers or all feminists.

This analysis of *Rome* examines the narrative and visual elements that are used to characterize brotherhood and sisterhood in order to determine how the show frames patriarchal ideology. The analysis is divided into two parts: brotherhood and sisterhood. Each part contains a brief introduction to the topic and characters, tables that organize characteristics of the narrative and visual elements, and discussions of each.

#### Brotherhood

*Rome's* main characters are Pullo and Vorenus, soldiers of the thirteenth legion. Their relationship signifies brotherhood. They are the heroes of the show, and frequently call each other "brother." Their story is also the underlying master narrative that ties all of the other plotlines together. Their characterization "is much more interesting and complicated as a topic than the usual presentations of the Roman military as a disciplined monolithic unit suggest" (Brice, 2008). They slash and hug their way through both seasons of the series. Although they frequently argue, and even fight each other nearly to the death one time in the second season, the two always return to one another for support. The notion that their bond is unbreakable is established in Season I, Episode 11, "The Spoils," when Vorenus shows duty to his closest friend as more important than his duty to the state, called the "quintessential Roman act," by saving Pullo from death in the

gladiator arena (Cooke, 2008, p. 85). Table 1, Brotherhood Narrative Elements, outlines the narrative details of the scene.

**Table 1. Brotherhood Narrative Elements**

<b>Setting</b>	Gladiator Arena. A public space where fighting is expected and endorsed by Rome. It's a natural place for the events that occur. Middle of the day. Sun shining. Brown hues, dust, dirt. Dense, noisy audience.
<b>Character</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Pullo</u> first sits on the dirt ground in his brown, torn tunic, reflecting his low status and imminent fate. He repeats the phrase, "Thirteen," as he defeats gladiators.</li> <li>• <u>Vorenus</u> wears a green cloak over his brown tunic and stands silently at the sidelines with clenched teeth. He eventually shouts, "Thirteen" as he moves in to rectify his former betrayal of the brotherhood, and his friend. He removes his green cloak which may represent his growth from naïve puppet of the state to a position of true manhood.</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vorenus struggles to determine where his loyalty should reside, with his lifelong friend and fellow soldier, Pullo, or with the corrupt state. It is an internal struggle with himself, which is caused by pressure from the state (Caesar) and is influenced by audience reaction.</li> </ul>
<b>Plot and structure</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pullo is robbed, seeks work as hit man and kills a man. Vorenus continues to follow Caesar's agenda, even if it requires him to disregard his moral standards. His wealth increases.</li> <li>2. Men in Thirteenth legion attempt to intervene in Pullo's unfair murder trial, Vorenus instructs them not to because it would implicate Caesar.</li> <li>3. Pullo is convicted and refuses to fight until gladiators taunt the thirteenth. Vorenus stands by to watch.</li> <li>4. As Pullo fights, the camera cuts to images of Caesar handing a bag of money to his servant who then runs to deliver the money.</li> <li>5. Pullo fights as more gladiators enter the arena. He tires. He shouts "Thirteen." One giant gladiator appears with a skull club. Pullo cannot get up. Vorenus runs in to rescue Pullo, lifts him to his feet.</li> <li>6. Caesar's servant places a bag of money at Erastes Fullman's table and tells him, "If we employ you again, best not use veterans."</li> </ol>

The events that lead up to the gladiator scene contrast the lives of Pullo and Vorenus as the two build separate lives, the former in the streets, the latter in the senate. Their conflict symbolizes the chasm that grows between soldiers and politicians, and commoners and the state. Episode 11 begins when Pullo is robbed by prostitutes and

seeks work from Erastes Fullman who gives him a little money upfront in exchange for Pullo's work as a hitman. But when Pullo heads to the bar, Erastes redirects him, "Not here. This is a respectable place, for decent citizens." Rejected by Rome's worst thugs, Pullo's destitute situation is contrasted by Vorenus' success. Vorenus is dressed well, and so is his family, as they stand in the street to listen to citizen concerns. Mascius (Micheal Nardone), a former soldier (and therefore brother) in the thirteenth, bypasses the line that has formed in front of Vorenus. He makes a few vulgar remarks; Vorenus scolds him and then asks him to return to his place in line. Mascius later visits Vorenus' and asks for land for the veterans. Vorenus follows Caesar's suggestion and personally buys out Mascius, even after he says, "I have been true to my brother...my honor is not for sale so cheap." Vorenus is offended when Caesar applauds the effort, "I will send you to negotiate all my corruptions. You have corrupted one man and saved thousands." Meanwhile, Pullo kills a man in the streets and, as he leaves the scene, an old woman follows him and repeatedly yells, "Murderer, murderer." He is accused of murder. At a party in Atia's house, Caesar lies and says that he never knew of the man that Pullo was hired to kill, and says to Vorenus and Octavian, "Soldiers have to learn there is no one above the law." When Pullo is on trial, he is called a wretched specimen, brute, barbarian, and "a tool, a puppet." In the crowd, his brothers from the Thirteenth legion plot to intervene in his unfair trial, but Vorenus discourages their actions, claiming that it would be politically unwise and would wrongfully implicate Caesar as an accomplice. Pullo is convicted and sentenced to execution in the gladiator arena. These conflicts prepare audiences to pity Pullo and question Vorenus' commitment to his former best friend and brotherhood.

The gladiator arena is a natural public place for the heroic and violent scene that follows. Audiences expect brutality, fighting and death in this public space. The warm, brown hues naturalize the environment. The dirt floor softens the scene and also establishes Pullo's lack of worth. It is the middle of the day. The setting is active. The crowd participates by booing, yelling and waving. The people are in control of the situation, not nature. This establishes the man's world of physical contests as active rather than passive.

Pullo is delivered to the arena with a chain around his neck and the soldiers throw his sword into the dirt. Pullo picks it up then throws it back down, indicating that he has no intention of fighting. He sits in the dirt and the camera pans to the crowd that boos him. Again, these narrative elements elicit empathy for Pullo. Table 2, Brotherhood Visual Elements, summarizes how the production techniques pair with these narrative elements to impart meaning.

The camera interrupts the gladiator arena by cutting to Posca entering Caesar's private quarters; saying nothing, Caesar hands him a bag of money and Posca leaves. This editorial technique builds suspense and, more importantly, links Caesar's business to Pullo and Vorenius' current conflict. It creates situational irony that may further justify Vorenius' future actions. The cut suggests that male conflicts are not only internal, but institutional.

The camera cuts back to the gladiators who head into the arena; one says, "Careful with this one. He's a soldier." This phrase shows that soldiers have the respect and fear of some of the most dangerous men, gladiators. Then the camera cuts to a long shot of Pullo who still sits in the dirt as his first three contenders circle him. As Table 2 outlines, this

scene effectively uses visual production techniques to emphasize Pullo and Vorenius' shift in temperament and character.

**Table 2. Brotherhood Visual Elements**

<b>Field of View</b>	Long shots of audience in gladiator arena. Close ups of Vorenius, Pullo and Timon. Long shot when Vorenius lifts Pullo to his feet and the crowd cheers as they exit the stadium.
<b>Camera Angle &amp; Movement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camera looks down on Pullo as he sits on the dirt floor. He appears small. Camera shifts to look up to Pullo in a close up as he responds to soldiers after they make fun of the Thirteenth legion. Camera establishes trust in Vorenius through eye-level close ups as Vorenius agonizes over his friend in the arena.</li> <li>• Camera looks up to Vorenius as he drives a sword down the gladiator's body. At the same time, the sun shines behind and above him.</li> <li>• As the men leave the arena, they walk closer to the camera, as if into <i>Rome's</i> audience living room.</li> </ul>
<b>Editing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the fight, the film is edited to cut to Posca collecting money from Caesar then running through streets.</li> <li>• Every time Pullo shouts "Thirteen" the camera immediately cuts to a close up of Vorenius' emotional expression.</li> <li>• Slow motion is used just before Vorenius enters the screen, romanticizing the event.</li> <li>• As the two men leave the arena, the screen does not fade to black. The next scene moves in.</li> </ul>
<b>Color</b>	Warm; brown, reds, orange

The crowd continues to boo Pullo, loudly. He has been characterized as an animal, "as common as rats." Vorenius has rejected him as a friend and Eirene refuses to forgive him for killing her lover. This isn't the first time Pullo has been in trouble, and his life on the streets has worn him down. Pullo has no reason to live. The gladiators tell him, "Stand up and fight" and ask, "Where's your dignity?"

"Let me die," Pullo replies. Pullo continues to show resistance until one gladiator says, "You're not but a bloody Molly, you and the whole Thirteenth." A close up shot captures Pullo at eye level as he slowly lifts his head and eyes to address the gladiator and finally says, "Don't talk the Thirteenth." The gladiators continue to taunt the

Thirteenth until one says, “Why don’t you and the Thirteenth line up and suck my....” At that, Pullo violently drives a stake through one contender, lobs off the head of another, and then slices off an arm of the third. Many more gladiators run in, and Pullo valiantly kills them all, just like he would have done on the battlefield. When Pullo shouts, “Thirteen!” for the first time, the camera immediately cuts to Vorenius who watches in agony as his friend continues to destroy gladiators, symbolically fighting to defend the Thirteenth. The slow music and slow motion begin and serve to romanticize the situation. Vorenius wants to help Pullo, but saving Pullo means breaking Roman law. A close up shows Vorenius flinch as Pullo severs his opponents, and simultaneously shouts “Thirteen.” But as the music slows and Pullo tires, his death seems inevitable. Once more, this time as he kneels on the ground, Pullo lifts his sword and shouts, “Thirteen.” Another close up of Vorenius shows him clench his jaws.

A gigantic gladiator enters the arena with his thorny skull-club. The low positioning of the camera magnifies the gladiator’s size. The crowd becomes still and silent. The gladiator kicks Pullo down and the camera cuts to Vorenius. The gladiator spits in Pullo’s face and the camera cuts to Vorenius. Just as the gladiator lifts his skull club to bear down on Pullo, Vorenius removes his green cloak, rushes forward through the crowd, unsheathes a sword, shouts “Thirteen,” and enters the arena. The removal of his cloak may symbolize his passage from innocence to maturity and manhood. This is the moment where he decides that his commitment to his brotherhood is more important than his commitment to the state. He takes many heavy blows, cuts the gladiator’s leg off at the knee, and then grabs the skull-club. He positions himself behind and above the gladiator and the sun shines around him. The camera looks up to Vorenius, giving him authority

and power. As he drives the skull-club down the gladiator's neck, crowds cheer and slow motion is used to dramatize Vorenius' action. The camera zooms to an aerial view at the edge of the arena so that the television audience can see Vorenius lift Pullo to his feet and carry him out of the arena where many gladiator bodies lay dead. As the Roman crowd shouts, "Pullo, Pullo," and establishes the pair as heroes, so, too does the television audience.

The emotional background music, slow motion footage, frequent cuts to close ups to Vorenius' expression of anguish, and long shots of the audience and its approval, all work together to signify that these men are heroes and that their brotherly love can overcome the most insurmountable conflicts, especially those created by the system. The warm colors soften the extremely violent scene and sunshine is used to position Vorenius as the hero. Vorenius and Pullo's commitment to one another is used to justify violence and disobedience. In this scene brotherhood is above the law. It is associated with salvation and heroism.

As the men leave the scene, the screen does not fade to black. Instead, the new scene appears behind it. Erastes Fullman, the man who hired Pullo to commit murder, is sucking down slimy black eels. Posca approaches him, places Caesar's payment on the table and warns, "If we employ you again, best not use veterans." This dialogue establishes Caesar as a liar and Vorenius as a hero. It also cements the men's conflict as a result of institutional corruption, not interpersonal conflict.

These narrative and visual editorial choices encourage audiences to perceive brotherhood as a force that should not be challenged. Several fans post the arena fight

clips to YouTube. Responses to those clips illustrate the power of the scene, and the power of brotherhood that Pullo and Vorenus represent:

“friendship is the best weapon” --mteixeira22

“titus pullo is THE MAN!! + lucius verenous = unstoppable force!” --roas2

“Talking shit about the 13th and u will pay the price” --HCnyling

“pullo just was trying to find his way after getting out the army. not knowing he was killing for caesar and pissed on when he was caught, taking a seat in the arena was just a sign of discontent for the recent turn of events. to hear some ass clown down talk the legion he put his blood, sweat and soul into, gave him every reason in the world to slaughter everyone in that pit. lucius, his true brother in arms, couldn't sit by and watch him die like a dog. powerful scene.” –AvEryBadApPLe

As fan comments suggest, the gladiator arena scene supports two types of brotherhood—one established through military service (the 13<sup>th</sup> legion), and one established through a personal relationship between two men. As AvEryBadApPLe suggests, talking trash on Pullo’s legion of soldiers/brothers gives Pullo, “every reason in the world to slaughter everyone in the pit” and Vorenus’ relationship to him as a “true brother in arms” gives him reason to interfere with the gladiator match.

The next episode further romanticizes the victory of the gladiator scene. Episode 12 opens with a painter sitting next to Pullo in the hospital, sketching a draft of Pullo’s face. Pullo is taken aback and asks for an explanation, to which the painter replies, “You’re famous sir...the whole city loves you, sir. You and magistrate Vorenus are symbols of brotherly love and redemption” (Episode 12, Season I, “February of Kalends”). *Rome* supports the statement by following it with a public reenactment of the arena fight. In the audience Atia says to her daughter, “They look better in person,” which emphasizes the sexual attention the two men have gained. When Pullo hears of his fame, he sneaks out of the hospital, falls sick, and is delivered to Vorenus’ home, where even Vorenus’ wife,

Niobe, praises Pullo's return and attributes it as the reason for Vorenius' happiness (even though she rejected Pullo just weeks earlier when he murdered a slave in her courtyard). *Rome* uses many narrative and visual techniques to communicate that these two men signify salvation, redemption, and victory.

Pullo and Vorenius share many moments of brotherhood similar to the gladiator fight. Pullo kills the man who slept with Vorenius' wife, helps save Vorenius' children from a slave camp and fathers Vorenius' children. Likewise, Vorenius saves Pullo's son from Octavian, and loses his life in the effort. Their egregious acts of violence, because they are packaged within moments of tender brotherhood, seem justified, romanticized and glorified. They consistently save one another from danger and death. Violence committed by these men, too, is depicted as impulsive, as illustrated in the gladiator scene. Neither man shows up to the arena with the intent to fight. External forces cause them to lash out. This reduces their accountability and increases their heroicness.

Whereas *Rome* associates brotherhood with salvation and heroism, it associates sisterhood with death and villainy. Women's violence, as represented through Atia and Servilia, is premeditated and rooted in selfish aims. As much as *Rome* romanticizes brotherhood, it entombs sisterhood.

#### Sisterhood

As Pullo and Vorenius save each other, Servilia and Atia try to destroy each other. The relationship between Atia of the Julii and Servilia of the Junii is vicious. The two female patricians fight for two seasons. Their conflict begins in the first season when Atia outs Servilia's affair with Julius Caesar because she fears Servilia's growing power. To retaliate, Servilia attempts to poison Atia. Atia's men strip and beat Servilia in Rome's

streets. Servilia engages Atia’s daughter in a bisexual relationship. Atia tortures Servilia nearly to death. And so it goes until Servilia’s son and only heir dies in a war against Antony and Octavian and, with him, Servilia’s hopes for a formal, powerful position over Atia. In Episode 7, Season 2, “Death Mask,” Servilia decides to commit suicide and to use it as a way to summon the powers of the underworld to unleash the most “phenomenal curse” on Atia. Table 3, Sisterhood Narrative Elements, summarizes the narrative characteristics of the scene.

**Table 3. Sisterhood Narrative Elements**

<b>Setting</b>	Black cobble stone street, just outside Atia’s doorstep. A public space where suicide is unexpected. Overcast. Cool grey and blue hues, wet street, hard stone ground.
<b>Character</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Servilia</u> wears a grey, plain dress. She is covered in ashes. Her servant wears blue. She kneels on the ground, immobile. She repeats, “Atia of the Julii, I call for justice” and then, “Curse this woman. Send her bitterness and despair for all of her life. Let her taste nothing but ashes and iron.”</li> <li>• <u>Atia</u> wears sage green. She stands in the corner of her doorway, looks down on Servilia. She says, “Here I am you crazy bitch. Speak your peace and then be gone.”</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Servilia wants revenge and Atia wants to avoid her.</li> <li>• Interpersonal conflict between two women driven by their ambition for power begins in Season I.</li> </ul>
<b>Plot and structure</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Servilia applies her son’s death mask to her face, indicates her desire to die. Atia arranges marriage between Jocasta and Posca, suggests to Antony that they marry at the same time but is convinced not to by Antony. Servilia’s chanting interrupts their conversation about marriage and Atia leaves.</li> <li>2. Antony and Octavian argue over a bribe offered by Herod.</li> <li>3. Servilia curses Atia.</li> <li>4. Antony and Octavian make amends. Atia suggests a marriage to express their political unity to the people. The men excuse her to discuss the matter.</li> <li>5. Atia says “I love you” to Antony after they have sex. She proceeds to verbally plan the wedding and Antony tries to interrupt.</li> <li>6. Octavia and Antony get married. The wedding ceremony is an awkward affair for everyone.</li> <li>7. Antony consummates the marriage with Octavia. Atia goes outside to the site of Servilia’s curse and experiences a mental flashback.</li> <li>8. Gaia purchases poison to kill Eirene.</li> </ol>

Again, the events that lead up to this scene are important because they set expectations and influence audience perceptions. Episode 7 opens at Servilia's house, which is shrouded in darkness. Inside, she places the death mask of Brutus on her own face and sobs. Her body slave comforts her but it is clear that Servilia is ready to die. In the next scene, which also shows backstage behavior among women, Jocasta (Camilla Rutherford) cries uncontrollably because Atia has arranged for her to marry an older man. These scenes characterize women as emotional reservoirs.

During Jocasta's wedding Atia stands beside Antony, her lover, and suggests that they marry as well, that day. Antony says their wedding should be more grand. Their conversation is interrupted by Servilia's mantra, "Atia of the Julii, I call for justice," which sets the tone for a personal conflict between two women. Unlike the men whose dialogue centers on the collective noun, Thirteen, the women in this scene refer directly to each other. Servilia repeats her statement for many days.

Atia tries to ignore the mantra but is driven mad by Servilia's perseverance. Finally Atia opens her front door and exposes the cold, hard setting. Servilia kneels on the black, wet cobble stone street, just outside Atia's doorstep. Passersby stand motionless, shocked, and silenced by the unnatural scene of a patrician woman dressed in a grey, shapeless dress, chanting as her body servant showers her with ashes. Servilia's long, loose, grey hair indicates that death is nearby or may already be present. Blue, cool hues dominate the overcast day and establish an ominous mood. The staging of the event clearly marks it as a premeditated act of personal vengeance. It also contrasts the arena fight, which was staged with warm colors on a sunny day.

A long shot shows Atia in a green dress, which could symbolize innocence, a theory which may be justified by her behavior. She seems to be the only one at the scene that cannot read all the signs spelled out before her. Atia nervously and naively addresses the stereotypical stone, cold woman, her nemesis:

- Atia: “Here then. Here I am you crazy bitch. Speak your peace and then be gone. Here I am.” [Close up of Servilia, cut to close up of Atia]
- Servilia: [Long shot of Servilia as she raises her arm to cast a gesture of the devil in Atia’s direction. Cut to close up of Servilia, her gesture in the foreground] “God’s below. I am Servilia of the most ancient and sacred Junii [cut to close up of Atia] on whose bones the ancient hills of Rome [cut to Servilia] are built. I summon you to listen. Curse [cuts to Atia, slowly zooms in to an extreme close up as Servilia finishes her curse] this woman. Send her bitterness and despair for all her life. Let her taste nothing but ashes and iron. [cut to Servilia] Gods of the underworld, all that I have left I give to you in sacrifice [cut to extreme close up of Atia] if you would make it so.” [Long shot of Atia at her doorstep as Servilia drives a sword into her body. Her body servant kisses her and then removes the sword then drives it through her own body. Cuts to close up of Atia. The two women lay motionless, bleeding on the cobble stone street, just outside Atia’s house. The camera pans them at ground level, pans the audience, cuts to a close up of Atia]
- Antony: “Now that is an exit.” [Complete silence. Onlookers stare at the two dead women bleeding into the street. They look at Atia in horror.]
- Atia: [In shock, disbelief] “She’s dead.” [Camera cuts from extreme close up of Atia’s face to full aerial shot of Servilia and her servant lying dead on the wet cobble stone street; camera slowly retreats away from them and, as onlookers turn to leave, the camera fades to black].

Note that this scene has less action than the gladiator scene and is marked by more intense dialogue, which reifies the stereotype that men are physical and women are verbal. As Table 4, Sisterhood Visual Elements, shows, the editors chose not to cut to other narratives or plotlines, as they do in the gladiator scene. This restricts the cause of the conflict between women to a personal feud between them; external factors do not influence their situation. Also, female actions, including Servilia’s graphic suicide, are

presented in real-time whereas male actions in the gladiator scene were edited into slow motion. Real-time motion eliminates compassion from this exchange between women.

**Table 4. Sisterhood Visual Elements**

<b>Field of View</b>	Long shots of Atia in her doorway. Long shot of Servilia kneeling on the cobble stone street, motionless onlookers. Many extreme close ups narrow the field of view and increase the intensity.
<b>Camera Angle &amp; Movement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camera cuts between long shots of Servila and the plebian audience that surrounds her in the streets, Atia’s face, Servilia’s face, and pans the audience response.</li> <li>• As the scene closes, the camera retreats from an aerial view of the two women lying dead on the cobble stone street. The screen fades to black.</li> </ul>
<b>Editing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All images are in real-time.</li> <li>• During Servilia’s curse, there are no cuts to parallel scenes.</li> <li>• When Servilia says “Curse” the camera cuts to a close up of Atia’s shocked, scared face.</li> <li>• As the scene closes, the camera retreats from an aerial view of the two women lying dead on the cobble stone street. The screen fades to black.</li> </ul>
<b>Color</b>	Cool; grey, blues

Ashes are a dominant theme in this scene, simultaneously used in dialogue and visuals. Servilia’s grey hair is coated in ashes and the camera closes in on her ashy eyes as she says, “Let her taste nothing but ashes and iron.” Ashes connote death and associate these women, and their relationship, with death. The ashes work on another level, too, to symbolize Servilia’s mourning for her son. Because her suicide shows penance, it solidifies her role in her son’s betrayal of Caesar, which eventually led to the death of the two most important men in her life—her son and lover. Servilia mourns her losses in extreme ways, which stereotypes her as an emotional reservoir. It also reifies patriarchal ideology that a woman’s most important roles are as a mother and lover.

The techniques used to close the scene are very different than ones used to close the gladiator scene. The producers position the camera directly above the two women that lay dead on the black, stone street. Television viewers are distant from the characters and

action, which creates a sense of isolation. The crowd's response to the scene reiterates this message. The crowd stands silent and motionless instead of clapping and waving. They eventually turn to walk away. The overcast day turns to night. The camera retreats from the scene to de-emphasize the subject matter and to further isolate Servilia and her body slave. The screen fades to black. *Rome's* producers frame these women as abandoned to generate empathy, but this is not a critique of patriarchal ideology, especially when one considers the context. First, *Rome* frames this as a private feud between two women, which absolves the state and the institution of responsibility. Second, *Rome* gives Servilia agency, but only to destroy another woman and to disrupt the social order. Servilia's death is arguably one of the most potent deaths in the series, filled with agency. Servilia regains her sanity to enact one of her greatest wishes, to ruin her nemesis through a phenomenal curse. However, her agency is undermined by her characterization. She is the stereotypical lonely, vengeful, single mother and bitter ex-girlfriend whose only goal is to destroy another woman.

Servilia's suicide is a Pyrrhic victory—a win at too great a loss. She lost her son, her family's future, and her own life, all to seek revenge, gain power, and to curse Atia. The episode's producer explains, "Curses in Roman culture were the most significant things you could produce and manifest...[Servilia] is drawing from the lowest, darkest sources and firing them like a machine gun... This is a very significant moment in the character's arch" (John Maybury, Audio Commentary, Episode 7, Season II, "Death Mask").

Unfortunately, Servilia directs her curse at her peer, which supports patriarchal ideology that women cannot coexist cooperatively in this world. The curse is successful. Lindsay Duncan explains, "It spins completely out of control from here on in [for Atia and her

associates]. It's not just a goodbye to a character. It's introducing the beginning of the end for so much else" (Audio Commentary, Episode 7, Season II, "Death Mask").

Finally, *Rome* effectively links the fate of the republic to the conflict between Atia and Servilia by referencing it in future scenes and episodes.

The rest of the Episode 7 shows Atia's "curse kicking in" (John Maybury in Audio Commentary, Episode 7, Season I, "Death Mask"). Atia is seated at the table of negotiations between her son, Octavian, and her lover, Antony, who just reconciled their differences regarding a bribe from King Herod. Atia suggests that the two men demonstrate their reconciliation publicly through a marriage between families. The men ask her to leave so that they can discuss the proposition. She leaves thinking that she will marry Antony. However, the two men agree that Antony will marry Atia's daughter, Octavia, and he does. As the two newlyweds reluctantly consecrate their marriage, Atia walks out to the site of Servilia's curse. Again, the camera looks down onto the cobble stone street. Atia looks down to the place where Servilia lay dead and hears Servilia's curse in her head, "Send her bitterness and despair for all her life. Let her taste nothing but ashes and iron." This flashback indicates the importance and power of the curse. Atia is lonely and heartbroken but *Rome* associates her misfortune less with arranged marriages and more with Servilia's curse.

*Rome's* patriarchal vision of sisterhood does not end with the death of Servilia's character. Instead, Servilia's suicide curse parallels another deadly female relationship in Episode 7, this time, among lower class women. This situation amongst women, too, leads to a Pyrrhic victory. Eirene, a freed slave and pregnant wife of Pullo, attempts to assert her social rank when she asks Gaia, a woman hired by Pullo to manage the

prostitutes in the Aventine, to fetch wood. Gaia is of lower rank but is stronger than Eirene and refuses to cooperate. Their fight gets out of hand and they threaten to kill each other. Eirene interrupts Pullo and Vorenus and demands that Pullo reprimand Gaia. In her foreign accent she stands over Pullo in her light-blue dress (a stark contrast the warm, brown, natural world of men), she says, “You must go to beat her to dead. That whore, that Gaia.” The men laugh at her accent and demand. After staging Eirene as humorous and pitiable, *Rome* gives her a Pyrrhic victory. Pullo follows Eirene’s orders and beats Gaia. He also rapes her (although *Rome* absolves Pullo of such an egregiously violent act by having Gaia plant the first kiss). The next day, Gaia is badly bruised but, although submissive to her mistress, is not broken. She heads directly to a witch doctor to purchase poison to kill Eirene in retaliation. As she exits the witch doctor’s office, her image liquefies into a golden mask and the credits follow. This imagery serves as the final nail in sisterhood’s coffin, as is best explained by John Maybury, “So we start with the death mask of Servilia and end with the death mask of Gaia” (Audio Commentary, “Death Mask”). The narrative and visual elements in this episode are carefully selected to link lower class female villainy to Servilia and Atia’s conflict, and to associate both of those female relationships with death through the imagery of death masks.

One could say that this particular episode is an egregious example of *Rome*’s patriarchal, and misogynist, vision of sisterhood. In fact, women support one another a few times on the show. Atia, Cleopatra and Servilia frequently turn to their body slaves for support through tough times (and the body slaves show an enormous level of commitment to their mistresses), but those could be called “sister-for-hire” sisterhoods. The body slaves must be committed to their mistresses. As another example, Octavia and

Atia rectify their mother/daughter relationship in the last two episodes. But this is only when Atia has finally become the “guileless and sentimental” stereotype that we expect from women of her age and position, and with her ambition (Episode 11, Season II).

Mourning Antony’s death, Atia has no gusto, so her daughter encourages her to prepare for Octavian’s triumph:

Octavia: So have you thought of your dress? I think you should wear that blue dress. All my life I’ve watched you strive for this moment. Look at you. [Atia looks miserable as she mourns, incense smoke adds to the drama and signifies her loss]

Atia: It’s amusing, isn’t it?

Octavia: I don’t know what I shall do if you give up.

While this scene is comforting for a moment, because it reifies the traditional view of a mother/daughter relationship, it is quickly followed by the final, female power play in the series, an argument between Livia (Augustus’ new wife) and Atia. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship flares up, this time with two women arguing over who should be the first to greet the Roman people at Augustus’ triumph, a celebration of his victory over Antony and Cleopatra. Atia surprises Livia and shows up late and positions herself in the center of the female parade, but Livia corrects her:

Livia: [midshot] Oh I don’t mind really, but it is I should go first. You will find if you consult the priests, the wife takes precedence.

Atia: [midshot] I don’t give a fuck what the priests say. I won’t let a vicious little trollop like you walk ahead of me. I go first.

Livia: [midshot] I take no offense, of course. You are not yourself.

Atia: [slowly, extreme close up] I know who you are. I can see it now. You’re swearing that one day, you’ll destroy me. Remember, far better women than you have sworn to do the same. Gone all of them now. [As the doors open, and sun shines in, Atia strides forward, and Livia stands silent, looks to her own mother for empathy. Octavia smiles for her mother’s victory]

At first glance, and as entertainment, this scene is powerful and triumphant. Despite Servilia’s curse, and Atia’s subsequent losses, Atia still has an amazing ability to craft a

witty, verbal retaliation that establishes her powerful position in the woman's world. The camera's intimacy closes any distance that may have existed between the audience and Atia. Television audiences are encouraged to empathize with her, especially after seeing Octavia's pride in her mother. At first glance, a scene like this communicates agency and power. Fans celebrate the scene. But their responses show that *Rome's* portrayal of Atia is actually an appropriation of the patriarchal ideal of domination. The scene was posted to YouTube as "Infamous meeting between Atia and Livia" on May 1, 2007. YouTubers comment on the scene in October 2008, praising Atia's characterization and actions: Arturostardust comments, "I guess, at the end, the biggest bitch won. I don't say it as an insult, Atia is just awesome." Jolene8 writes, "I love Atia. Strong, Vicious, A Survivor.... A woman after my own Heart." Another fan, PCoderch, asks, "How is this any different from a bunch of bitchy high school cheerleaders putting each other down to decide who's gonna be prom queen?"

This type of thinking is contrary to feminist visions for positive, mutual relationships in society. The scene communicates misogynist, patriarchal power, not female agency. The verbal power fight centers on domination, not mutuality or interdependence. Atia uses her rank, her position of authority, to dominate others. Atia is the "biggest bitch." She threatens her daughter-in-law with the same tool that all of the other women have been associated with throughout the series—death. She's "vicious." She references "far better women have tried to do the same, gone all of them now" so that television audiences are reminded of the many women that have competed with Atia in the past, and lost: Jocasta, Cleopatra, and especially Servilia. While she may appear to be a "strong" woman, a "survivor," feminists would agree that Atia does not represent the type of

woman they hope to see represented in media. The patriarchal value of domination has simply been appropriated to women.

This final showdown between Atia and Livia communicates that competition is an innate, never-ending element feminine existence. Atia remains committed to a selfish, patriarchal vision of female agency. Jennybabes17 reflects this ideology in response to the clip on YouTube: “Ha that shut her up! I love Atia and im glad she put Livia in her place. After all she's been through she deserves to walk ahead of everyone else, especially some little cow who thinks she's it now that she's married to Octavian.”

*Rome* continues on to the next scene, to the triumph, a city-wide celebration to mark Augustus' victory over Antony and Cleopatra. Crowds cheer, banners wave, and the irony is thick. It is not a triumph. It is yet another Pyrrhic victory. It is a victory that is won at too great a cost, for everyone, but most especially for Atia, which *Rome* clarifies through visuals. With no dialogue, the visuals and music communicate the emotional value of this scene. Most close ups are of Atia. In these close ups the camera is still, except for when it pans with Atia as she turns to look at Antony's dead body with tears in her eyes. In all other scenes, the camera moves to capture the excitement of the crowd. The stark contrasts in camera movement and positioning establish the irony. Producer Bruno Heller explains, “With this scene we wanted to make it as big and as grand as it would have been but, to be clear, this scene is really about Atia and what she has had to give up to get to this moment of Triumph.” Jonathan Stamp adds, “What everybody has” (Audio Commentary, Episode 10, Season II). In the final close up of Atia, audiences see tears welling in her eyes as she looks to the left at Antony's dead body. This is an obvious parallel to the night in Episode 7, “Death Mask” when she walked outside, alone,

late at night, to stare at the cobble stone street where Servilia cursed her. Like Murphy in *Murphy Brown* and Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Atia ends up sad and lonely. Only this time it is not just because of her ambition, it is also because one of her female peers cast an effective curse.

These narrative and visual techniques marry Atia's demise to Servilia's curse and therefore deflect attention away from the patriarchal institutions that value domination. While women are active participants in patriarchy, and often are proponents of it, *Rome* personalizes the problem as one that exists between women. When the screen fades to black on Atia, *Rome* indicates that her win is actually a great loss, and a permanent one.

*Rome* employs narrative and visual elements to develop pseudo-feminism, a purposefully destructive interpretation of feminism that appropriates patriarchal masculinity onto women (thus creating what audiences may interpret as a strong women) and romanticizes male violence done in the name of brotherhood (thus men's emotional commitment to one another justifies their egregiously violent behavior). The series associates male relationships with heroics and salvation and female relationships with villainy and death. As much as *Rome* romanticizes brotherhood, it entombs sisterhood.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

If *Rome* might be used as a barometer to measure society's cultural perception of feminism, one might infer that society is resistant to feminism and misinterprets it. *Rome*'s producers chose to reify patriarchal values by using what this study will call pseudo-feminism, which is the acknowledgement that feminism exists but a patriarchal repackaging of it in such a way that promotes a society governed by domination and sexism. *Rome* romanticizes domination, casts sexist stereotypes into the past, and appropriates patriarchal visions of masculinity onto women. This thesis begins with a quote from bell hooks who illustrates a feminist vision of the world "where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction" (hooks, 2000). *Rome*'s narrative and visual choices related to representations of brotherhood and sisterhood obstruct feminist visions of interdependent, mutual relationships.

*Rome* envisions a society of mutual respect, but only among men. As Table 5 summarizes, the relationship between Pullo and Vorenus signifies brotherhood, salvation, teamwork, heroics and victory. Evidence for these signified meanings are reflected in the way Pullo and Vorenus' conflict develops (through external forces that were outside of their control, representative of the state) and ends (Vorenus disregards the rules of the state and saves his brother from the gladiator arena), the dialogue prevalent in the scene ("Thirteen!" which is a collective proper noun, used to connote the name of the legion and also the figurative concept of brotherhood), and filmed (slow motion creates a more tender, romantic situation as Pullo strives to defend the Thirteenth and close ups of

Vorenus as he struggles to decide to go in and help Pullo; long shot as Vorenus lifts Pullo and carries him out of the scene and the crowd shouts “Pullo, Pullo;” the scene closes as the men walk toward the camera, closer to the audience). The setting of the gladiator arena institutionalizes the violence that occurs inside, as do the natural shades of brown clothing that Pullo and Vorenus wear. The sunlight projects a hopeful mood as Vorenus drives a large sword down a giant gladiator’s neck. Thus Vorenus passes the test of manhood—he defends his fellow brother in arms rather than the corrupt state, beats a man twice his size, and carries his brother to safety. Vorenus does what women in *Rome* cannot do: abandon his own selfish ambition for the good of a fellow citizen. Although this scene highlights the emotional side of soldiers, not just their rigidity, it glorifies patriarchal tropes of masculinity—violence and brotherhood.

**Table 5. Conclusions**

<b>Signifiers</b>	Pullo & Vorenus	Atia & Servilia
<b>Signified</b>	Brotherhood Masculinity Victory Salvation Heroism	Sisterhood Femininity Pyrrhic Victory Death Villainy
<b>Reifies patriarchal ideology</b>	Male conflicts develop out of institutional requirements. Male violence is justified and forgiven. It is natural and supportive. Men can identify problems of the institution and overcome them by working together. Male bonds are capable of true victories over institutions. Men are natural leaders.	Female conflicts develop out of interpersonal relationships. Female violence is done out of malice and premeditation. It seems unnatural and destructive. It threatens the stability of social order. Women’s relationships are driven by competition for power. Female victories come at too high a price and perhaps ought not be sought. Women are emotional reservoirs.
<b>Critiques patriarchal ideology</b>	Shows that violence, especially male violence, is institutionalized (although it shows that to end violence, one must use violence, which is a patriarchal way of resolving conflict).	Shows that women can be patriarchs (although <i>Rome</i> may take this too far, following the Adam and Eve model, by suggesting that the women are responsible for activities that lead to the destruction of the republic).

Female relationships are more complicated because *Rome's* producers employ pseudo-feminism. In *Rome*, pseudo-feminism is apparent in two ways: first, the series increases the number and breadth of female characters which obscures its regressive characterization of them; second, it assigns patriarchal masculinity to women which makes them appear strong, causing critics to say they “challenge expectations,” in order to obfuscate their roles as agents of patriarchy.

The first attribute of pseudo-feminism is the inclusion of additional female characters, but a regressive characterization of them. The lack of historical documentation regarding working and upper class women could have empowered *Rome's* producers to craft more positive relationships among female characters, in the same way that it empowered them to craft the supportive relationship between Pullo and Vorenus. But, in fact, they chose to do the opposite. In *Rome*, females do not “stick together, support one another” and they are not team players (hooks, 2000, p. 14). Most female relationships are ones of “jealousy, fear, and hatred” (p. 14). For example, working class women are reflected in Eirene, who is said to “forge a new path” (Regalie, 2007, p. 4). But her new path, however, is rooted in sexism and hegemony. She is characterized as a foreign “other” that the men laugh at (because of her accent and her petty concerns); Eirene is also characterized as naïve because she does not notice that her husband slept with Gaia instead of whipping her, and that Gaia feigned obedience as she plotted retaliation. Eirene's conflict with Gaia mirrors Servilia's conflict with Atia. The link between these destructive sisterhoods is deliberately created through death mask imagery. *Rome's* narrative and visual characterization of Eirene and Gaia is insidious. Solidarity amongst

women is limited to brief moments of support between a mistress and her slave, or a mother and daughter. This reifies traditional roles for women as servants and mothers.

The second attribute of pseudo-feminism is the appropriation of patriarchal masculinity to women, which is most apparent in the narrative and visual characterization of Atia and Servilia's relationship. For example, they host political discussions in their homes (Servilia with Cassius and Atia with Antony and Octavian). They suggest political strategy that is adopted by politicians (Servilia suggests her son betray Caesar; Atia suggests Octavian and Antony seal their agreement with a marriage between families). Their behaviors, however, are framed as quests for power over each other and for powerful positions in Rome (whereas the men's behaviors are framed as quests for survival within a corrupt institution). Even Antony scolds Atia, "Please try to see beyond your own desires" (Episode 7, Season 2, "Death Mask"). Unlike the men, women cannot negotiate and coexist. Their quests for power know no boundaries. These women are determined, yes, but determined to dominate, not determined to change the system that oppresses them. *Rome* resolves their conflict in a way that destroys them both. Servilia's curse is a powerful scene; she has agency. But that agency is used to cast a curse against another woman instead of on the system that oppresses them both. In this scene she is grey, covered in ashes, and the anger is evident in her slow, determined speech. The site of her curse is a hard, cobble stone street, just after rain, and the mood is overcast. It suggests impending doom and contrasts the gladiator scene that is characterized by sunlight and warm colors. Because the scene of Servilia's curse does not cut away to other narratives or plotlines, their conflict is staged as interpersonal, not institutional. Servilia affects her desired outcome. Her curse symbolizes the climax of their

interpersonal fight; narrative and visual techniques communicate the critical role that the curse plays in historic events that follow, namely the marriage between Antony and Octavia. The night of the wedding, Atia returns to the cobble stone street and flashbacks to the site of the curse. The last time Atia speaks, she threatens her new daughter-in-law by reminding her of women like Servilia who have tried to compete with her. Atia and Servilia are persistent symbols of corruption in *Rome*. As Table 5 summarizes, their relationship signifies competition, death, villainy and Pyrrhic victories.

Like Servilia's curse, *Rome* is a Pyrrhic victory. *Rome's* producers succeed in presenting a popular, entertaining television series, which sparks scholarly and popular discussions about gender. It presents strong female characters, emotionally connected male buddies, clothing as a concern for both genders, all of which, on the surface, seem supportive of feminist ideology. However, this semiotic analysis shows how *Rome* undermines a feminist vision of a world where there is no domination. Servilia conquers Atia through her curse. Pullo and Vorenus conquer the state through their gladiator fight. Both relationships glorify domination and violence, but the curse from one female to another remains a persistent symbol that stereotypes women as competitive, vengeful and emotional reservoirs. The characterization of Atia and Servilia appears to resist misogynistic stereotypes, because the women have agency, but it actually reinforces and crystallizes male hegemonic stereotypes. Popular media needs to move beyond representations of antiquity that perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and support a vision of the world where "where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction" (hooks, 2000).

## Recommendations for Further Study

Future feminist media studies may consider semiotic analysis of binary oppositions, even though binary thinking originates in patriarchal societies. Because our society creates meaning through oppositions, it may be useful to deconstruct them in order to envision a new reality. *Rome* portrays several binary oppositions that may benefit from feminists readings: perpetrators and victims, motherhood and fatherhood, and girls and boys. To build on those studies, it would be interesting to analyze audience perceptions of those oppositions. Several social media tools like YouTube and Twitter allow researchers to look at timely, anecdotal audience response at the time they occur and even months later. A systematic, quantitative study of those responses may reveal ways that narrative and production techniques affect audience perceptions. Finally, although many feminists claim that male-male buddy films are more prevalent than female-female buddy films, no scholarly, quantitative study fully verifies this claim. This study establishes that *Rome* presents positive male asexual friendships and destructive female relationships; a quantitative study may show whether or not this type of depiction is as prevalent as feminists claim.

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