

## Screening a New Spartacus: Tradition and Originality in STARZ *Spartacus* (2010-13)

(RS = Reception Studies)

The Spartacus legend has inspired numerous receptions over the centuries in a variety of different media, from stage plays to ballet to film, while the figure of the rebel slave leader has often served as an icon of resistance against oppression in modern political movements and popular ideologies. The most recent adaptation of the Spartacus story is the wildly successful four-season television series on the STARZ premium cable channel, produced by Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert (of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*), which both engages with earlier receptions as it breaks new ground. The first season, *Spartacus: Blood & Sand* (2010), tells of the capture of Spartacus in Thrace and his training as a gladiator in the *ludus* of Quintus Lentulus Batiatus; this was followed by *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011), a mini-series prequel to the first season, which fills in the backstory on the rise of the *lanista* Batiatus in the gladiator business. The third installment (second season) of the series, *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012), depicts the aftermath of the slaves' bloody escape from the *ludus*, and the final season, *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013), will focus on the decisive conflict between the rebel army and the Roman military led by Marcus Licinius Crassus. While *Spartacus* gained immediate notoriety for its heady mix of highly stylized, CGI-enhanced violence with a shocking amount of onscreen nudity and graphic sexual acts, the series also offers a new visual, narrative, and thematic aesthetic for the depiction of the Spartacus story and its received meanings. The four papers on this panel will explore the ways in which the Starz series nods to earlier Spartacus receptions (especially the 1960 Stanley Kubrick film), while at the same time it applies new techniques of interrogation to current issues such as love and sexuality, race and class, and violence and spectacle. The panel will consider the new *Spartacus* as a provocative contribution

to our understanding of how specific threads of reception are constantly being reinvented to suit contemporary tastes, aspirations, and anxieties.

Time Requested: 2 hours

AV Requirements: LCD digital projection & sound cables for PPT with embedded video clips.

## Memories of Storied Heroes

The story of Spartacus, retold in many forms in culture high and low, is an “age-old” story of the struggle for freedom and of resistance to imperial oppression. The STARZ series *Spartacus*, however, presents a more complicated vision of the gladiatorial institution. The Roman world is a system of profound constraint that operates upon all levels of society. This problematizes the notorious sexual and political license of Roman elites, just as it nuances the choices of the gladiators, who struggle to achieve agency even at the lowest levels of the hierarchy. Stripped of their past, the slaves of the *ludus* rebuild individual identity by redefining categories of value and connection, gender and family, becoming a band of brothers with their own loyalties and their own narratives of meaning.

A number of these narratives are embedded within Roman artifacts, as the producers create access to ancient “truths” through an archaeological pathway familiar to the audience. In the villa of Batiatus, *herm*-like sculptures have displaced the *imagines* of the atrium, representing the heritage of the family as creators and controllers of *ludus*. The men represented in portrait here are the champions, the “gods” of the arena, the “storied heroes” whose narrowly expressed narratives both symbolize the family honor and limit its ambition. The amphitheater of Capua functions as a visible expression of imperial prestige, deployed as a tool of local power that resonates within the city of Rome. The series’ persistent focus on the substructures and arena, however, reinscribes the building with the Spartacan counter-message of Roman failure, as the gladiators subvert the combat narratives and literally deconstruct the amphitheater using the tools of their own oppression. The *rudis* of Gannicus is likewise polyvalent. Symbol of his unique achievement of freedom, awarded for extraordinary performance in the arena, it is inscribed with his victories as an ostensible memorial in his honor. Gannicus recognizes it, however, as a slave

brand, a burden that forever binds his identity to the arena, a painful reminder of what he's lost, his own glories "long-forgotten." Spartacus challenges this perception, asserting that Rome is neither invincible nor eternal and that freedom is not a stick of wood.

## Partnership and Love in *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011)

In the prequel *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011), we are presented with the background for the events that took place in the first season of the show (2010). The prominence of the themes of partnership and love has been previously examined by Augoustakis (2013), who has demonstrated that love towards one's partner (heterosexual or homosexual) or towards one's fellow-gladiators (as in the friendship between Spartacus and Varro) sets in motion the revolt, as the viewer observes each member of the school join the team and cause of Spartacus (Crixus, Doctore/Oenomaus, Aurelia, and Mira). This paper analyzes the nexus of relationships in the prequel of the first season of the show, *Gods of the Arena*.

During the six episodes of the show, we witness Batiatus' transformation into a *lanista* and the clash with the *patria potestas* of his father. Batiatus is presented to the spectator in the same light as Spartacus in the first season of the show: he is slowly "freed" from the authority of his tyrannical and hard-to-please father to become an independent man and business owner. At the same time, the show emphasizes the slow bonding between the gladiators Gannicus and Crixus as foreshadowing of the kind of relationship that eventually leads Spartacus and his gang to escape from the *ludus* (the events covered by the 2012 season of the show, *Spartacus: Vengeance*). As this paper demonstrates, the prequel functions as an explanatory medium that helps the viewer understand the events of the show's first season, as well as a preparation for the second season of the show (*Vengeance*, 2012). Love and partnership become the *topoi* that will function as catalyst that leads the revolution to its apogee as well as to its final dissolution and defeat.

### WORKS CITED

Augoustakis, A. (2013), "Partnership and Love in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010)," in M.

Cyrino, ed., *Screening Love and Sex in the Ancient World*. New York: Palgrave.

## To Rape or Not Rape Lucretia

The dominant female character of the first three seasons of the 2010-13 STARZ television series is Lucretia, the wife of the gladiatorial *ludus* master Batiatus. As played by Lucy Lawless, Lucretia is both appealing and repellent, a tragic figure and a malicious villain. On first glance, she appears to bear little resemblance to her most famous ancient Roman namesake, the virtuous early Roman matron whose rape and suicide sparked the birth of the Republic. Yet the theme of Lucretia's sexual choices in the series and, in particular, her relationship to the act of rape, presents an ongoing reflection on the use of rape in modern historical fiction to assert power and to demean women. The question of rape in *Spartacus* is fraught with issues of power and its abuse, the dominant themes underlying the tragic drive of both seasons' plots. In one sense, any sexual act between a free person and a slave in the Roman world is rape, since the slave cannot meaningfully consent, and by this standard rape is constant and ubiquitous in every episode of the series.

The creators of *Spartacus* make a significant and meaningful distinction between this sort of implicit rape, which is depicted nonviolently and often performed silently by extras, and the violent, explicitly abusive rape of named characters. In the entire first season, despite the extreme amounts of both sex and violence in the show, no violent rape is depicted onscreen for the shock or titillation of the viewers. The single onscreen rape of a named character, the slave Diona, during the second season becomes one of the traumatic turning points of that season's arc. In the third season, "Vengeance," after escaping numerous previous near-rapes, Lucretia herself is finally raped – by her former slave, Ashur, thus setting up a reversal of the traditional power hierarchies. As in the second season, this sex scene is not glorified or eroticized, and Ashur is himself ultimately decapitated by his earlier offscreen rape victim, Naevia.

Tales of Rome and rape have gone hand-in-hand in the modern reception of ancient culture. In order to understand how *Spartacus* provocatively addresses such a tradition, this paper will offer a close study of both the rapes and the decisions not to rape that shape the representation of power and sexuality in *Spartacus*.

## The Real Housewives of Capua: Middle Class Striving and Upward Mobility in the House of Batiatus

By foregrounding the rebel slaves and gladiators who rose up in resistance against the elite commanders of the Roman military, the Spartacus reception tradition has often drawn attention to the lives of the lower classes living in late Republican Rome. The image of “the common people” emerges in many ways in the various adaptations of the Spartacus story that have been staged and screened over the years: they are slaves fighting for emancipation, workers fighting for rights, artists fighting for freedom of expression. Stanley Kubrick’s 1960 *Spartacus* film, in particular, underscores the realistically difficult lives of the slave families as they follow their leader: at the same time, the numerous optimistic scenes of their collective utopian society somewhat mitigates the narrative, both historical and cinematic, of their ultimate doom. Yet this focus on characters from the lower strata of society (mostly fictional), rather than solely on the aristocratic Romans (mostly historical), remains a persistent feature of the Spartacus reception tradition.

The STARZ *Spartacus* series inherits this un-epic tendency of focusing on characters of non-elite social classes, but it breaks new ground by emphasizing the lives and backstories of the middle class strivers, the *lanista* Batiatus (John Hannah), and his wife Lucretia (Lucy Lawless), and their relentless drive for upward mobility and financial security. This paper will demonstrate how the series effectively revolves around this ambitious, ruthless couple and their scheming aspirations to turn their *ludus* into the foremost gladiator spectacle business in all of Capua. In the series prequel and first season, Batiatus seizes control of the *ludus* from his sanctimonious father in order to build his stable of champions, while Lucretia stops at nothing to court the snobbish and sexually rapacious elite of Capua to secure her place in society alongside her

husband. The fact that their plans utilize violence, sexual manipulation, and multiple murders, however, does not diminish the characters' appeal to viewers, due in no small part to a pair of robust and sympathetic performances by Hannah and Lawless. This paper will argue that the series successfully uses visual and narrative strategies to do something innovative within both the epic cinematic tradition and the Spartacus reception tradition: *Spartacus* invites the audience to transfer their allegiance away from the Roman elite or the rebel slaves, and identify with the cunning bourgeois boot-strappers at the head of the House of Batiatus.