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Queer Heroes and Action Heroines: Gender and Sexuality in *Spartacus*

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History-inspired narratives are often revamped for and by contemporary media in order to operate as nexuses for sociocultural examination. Of course, some narratives are more open to speculation and interpretation than others. Take, for example, reconstructions of the Roman Empire in film: while archaeological and literary epistemologies can proffer us significant macrohistoric information about wealthy, educated males (and less often notable females,) microhistoric reconstructions of the lives, bodies, and behaviors of the “lesser classes” (gladiators, entertainers, and other Romans of lower status) are much more a product of scholarly speculation. In film and other screen-mediated arts, then, authors and producers are necessarily faced with a lot of intricate, difficult-to-answer questions. Microhistoric details that are primarily visual and help unfolding the plot, such as ancient bodies and their respective social behaviors, often need to be speculated upon and recreated without the benefit of the tangible types of archaeological and literary evidence that scholars have uncovered about upper-class and upper-crust Rome.

These microhistoric reconstructions of antiquity in popular culture are often infiltrated through the lens of contemporaneity. They are informed by their producers’ and scriptwriters’ own understanding of Greek and Roman culture. It is therefore not surprising that screen-mediated expressions of antiquity are often explored from the scholarly perspective of classical reception: the “two-way relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture” (Hardwick 4). Indeed, classical narratives offer a rather overt environment for discussion of both ancient as well as contemporary issues. Against this backdrop, this article examines how narratives
of equality in the television series *Spartacus* (2010-13) correspond with or deviate from historical detail and contemporary audience expectations regarding the nexus of heroism, gender, and sexuality in the Roman Empire.

Spartacus is the attested leader of a rebellion against the Roman Republic (from 73 to 71 BC; for historical discussion of this, see Plutarch, *Crassus* 8; Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.116; Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.8). Though none of Spartacus’ historical representations overtly suggest that he aimed at societal reformation by abolishing slavery and promoting equality, his legacy inspired many intellectuals across times and cultures to revamp his tale in order to connect it to their own concepts of social equality. ¹ Marx, in the Manchester letter to Engels in 1861, for example, considered Spartacus a real representative of the ancient proletariat. Spartacus also inspired the German Spartacus League, a forerunner of the Communist Party of Germany.

The figure of Spartacus has also been reproduced several times within the realm of popular culture. In this capacity, Spartacus has operated as a platform to explore social hierarchies, equality, the abolition of slavery, and egalitarianism.² In this (re-)making of ancient time and space, both authorship and social context are active: authors often reproduce narratives in order to elucidate specific concepts in favor of others that tie in to some form of ideology, or, at times, construct ideologies where they may be deemed lacking. This explains how key narratives can be leveraged for varying cultural and political purposes. It also explains how narratives of Spartacus afford varied expression and interpretation by enacting the same basic components differently. Like alternative versions of any old tale, Spartacus enables new layers of expression through primary persistence. In this capacity, narratives carry explanatory frameworks for the
social context of their tales, in turn shaped by its subsequent re-telling, a reception of antiquity.

Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), for example, was largely interpreted as an allusion to the Cold War and further political and social frictions in late 1950s Hollywood. The film *Spartacus* furthermore inspired the plot, setting, and costumes of an American mini-series similarly titled *Spartacus* (2004).³ Both adaptations largely follow the stereotypical form and characterization of a sword-and-sandal film: the main character is a muscular tanned man, while women are given only subordinate roles (for more on masculinity and the genre, see Cornelius 9, Bondanella 159, and Lucanio 2). In both adaptations, men and women also operate within the boundaries of particular contemporary gender roles. Men engage in arguments, duels, and battles, whereas women are primarily attractive with minimal character development: they serve as décor, both figuratively and literally. Both film narratives of Spartacus then, reinforce traditional patriarchal views of (non-dominant) women in ancient and current society. Similarly, their narratives of social equality are also casted within homosocial outlines: the story focuses on Spartacus’ masculine struggle against the Roman social elite, while the “female realm” remains auxiliary to the plot.

In contrast, I argue that the Starz-produced television series *Spartacus* deviates from such traditional enactments of gender roles. In the first season, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010), the narrative concentrates on Spartacus’ (Andy Whitfield, portrayed in later seasons by Liam McIntyre) enslavement in Thrace and his struggles as a gladiator in the *ludus* of Quintus Lentulus Batiatus (John Hannah). In the second season, *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (2011), the viewer is offered a prequel; it puts the story of Spartacus in context through narrating the rise of the Batiatus as a *lanista* in the gladiator business. The third season, *Spartacus: Vengeance* (2012), then continues the main plot
as the narrative depicts the aftermath of the slaves’ bloody escape from the *ludus*, a narrative of conflict which escalates into the final season, *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (2013), where Spartacus and his band of rebels rise against the Roman military, led by Marcus Licinius Crassus (Simon Merrells).

Clearly, *Spartacus* is thus consistent with the audience’s primary and current stereotypical expectations of a sword-and-sandal film: the narrative grows out of events within a *ludus* in the city of Capua, a carefully constructed male environment. While *Spartacus* could thus be read as yet another story of masculine play, this chapter shows that other, more emancipatory, interpretations are possible. In this essay, I argue that *Spartacus*, in spite of belonging to a genre comprised primarily of heteronormative and male-centered narratives about gladiators, redefines the genre’s definition of heroism by depicting a wider spectrum of sexual behaviors as well as granting female characters critical, action-infused roles throughout all four seasons of the television series. I will show that sexual preference matters little for male heroes, thus offering an arena for discussion on concepts of contemporary masculinities and heroism; in the same breath, female characters also evolve from the older sexualized and objectified females of other gladiatorial sword-and-sandal films to strong and brave action heroines, thus marking the evolution of the perception of ancient female sexuality in popular culture. Therefore, *Spartacus* operates as a platform for social equality from a gender perspective and can be used as an example of changing fashions in the representation of gender within the genre. Finally, I discuss how the television series reflects upon the impact of deeper scholarly outcomes on gender equality in the depiction of both ancient and contemporary societal structures.

*Redefining Gender within the Genre: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Heroism*
Rome in popular imagination projects a variety of visual interpretations and meanings, and it has been reproduced for film across disparate times and cultures. Within mainstream popular culture, historical fantasy inspired by antiquity was popularized after the cinematic trend of the Italian pepla of the 1950s and 1960s that were based loosely on mythology and legendary Greco-Roman history (for pepla see: Bondanella, Günsberg, and Lucanio). Recent scholarship has further investigated the Roman Empire in film, specifically from the perspectives of masculinity, cultural identity, and even whiteness studies. Indeed, within the context of a sword-and-sandal film, the action hero has been traditionally Caucasian and male, with females largely cast in a supporting role. The very emphasis on the representation of the body suggested the construction and projection of a specific type of a muscular (Caucasian) masculinity (Dyer 148-151). In fact, the majority of these strong heroes were actual bodybuilders, especially since the 1950s. Bodybuilders’ bodies are clearly gym or competition products: projects of leisure and wealth with connotations of (self) objectification, since the very sport of bodybuilding is centered around the spectator’s gaze (Davis and Weaving 105).

In classic Hollywood, the bodybuilder-shaped film protagonist evolves after the 1960s and obtains a heroic identity that is based on communal ideology rather than physical strength. Within the context of gladiatorial sword-and-sandal film, there are connotations of social equality that gradually become more central to the plot than the protagonist’s physical strength and action. Kirk Douglas in Spartacus (1960), for example, is not necessarily crudely violent, however muscular he may appear. In spite of the fact that the professional bodybuilder trend dies out entirely during the ‘90s, the idealized image of the white muscular male continued to serve as the precise embodiment of the ancient hero in contemporary film. Facilitated by the emergence of digital technology, the current representation of the male hero is now digitally enhanced. The
occasional use of the chroma key is deployed for special (action hero) effects as well as the enhancement of body, as in *300* (2006), *Immortals* (2011), and the remake of *Wrath of the Titans* (2012). Over time, however, the aesthetically pleasing embodiment of the male protagonist became less central for the genre. Male characterization currently follows the latest trend of the fragmented hero, where heroic qualities are distributed evenly within the group instead of the protagonist, thus pointing to collectivity rather than individualism (Elliott 59-74).

Furthermore, heteronormativity has been always another key relational aspect of the genre. Even recent films like *Gladiator* (2000), *Troy* (2004), *300, Immortals*, and *Wrath of the Titans* all depict standard tropes of positive masculinity (Pierce 40-57). The heroism of the male protagonist is evident through the use of physically active struggle against tyranny and is often built upon heteronormative lover, father, and husband roles. *Gladiator, 300, and Troy* go to great lengths to describe ancient masculinity as “safely” heteronormative by placing emphasis on the heterosexual performance of the leading men who are depicted in carefully constructed hetero-environments (Pierce 41-42). The masculinity of these protagonists (Maximus, Leonidas, and Achilles, respectively) is also reinforced further by the presentation of their antagonists. Villains appear in striking antithesis to the lead heroes in every way: they are physically weaker, morally degenerate, or even effeminated. The concept of the “good” and heteronormative male hero is further contrasted via the respective villain’s sexually deviant behavior, which ranges from cross-dressing to adultery to (implied) homosexuality. An exception is Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* (2004), a film in which the protagonist is portrayed as a bisexual male. However, sadly, Alexander’s sexual identity was perceived negatively by specific ethnic groups (Greeks of the American diaspora) as well as Christian unions (Carver 83-4 and Crowdus 12-23).
The representation of male characters in Starz’ *Spartacus* has a lot in common with earlier sword-and-sandal film, yet there are specific points in which it differs a great deal. The plot of the series unfolds in primarily masculine environments: Batiatus’ *ludus*, Roman amphitheatres (wooden and stone), and the underground pits (especially in *Gods of the Arena* and *Blood and Sand*). As the show focuses on gladiators, there are naturally muscular action heroes involved in a (digitally processed) active struggle against the higher echelon of the society of Capua. Communal ideology is of course central in *Spartacus*, where male characterization follows the trend of the “fragmented hero” and heroic qualities are distributed evenly within the group of characters. In spite of these common attributes with older sword-and-sandal films, however, the series redefines the genre definition of heroism through a thorough deconstruction of previous receptions of Roman sexuality in relation to heroism.

So what makes male protagonists in *Spartacus* differentiated from the usual paradigms? Character behavior in *Spartacus* seems to be inspired by actual Roman cultural concepts of sexuality. The nexus of heroic masculinity and sexuality are broadly defined in the series, deviating from the strict stereotypical heteronormative model of previous sword-and-sandal films. Roman society was indeed patriarchic, and masculinity was premised on governing oneself and others of lower status in both civic and sexual terms (Cantarella xii, Langlands 17). Roman conceptions of sexuality did not recognize current dichotomies such as “homosexuality” or “heterosexuality,” and there are no words in Latin to describe these concepts (Skinner). In terms of concepts of heroic masculinity, a man was meant to have *valor* in the battlefield (McGinn 326, Evans 156–157) but this was unrelated to their sexual preferences or practices. Roman ideals of masculinity were thus premised on taking an active role that was also the prime directive of the social construction of masculine sexual behavior for Romans. The impetus toward
action might express itself most intensely in an ideal of dominance that reflects the hierarchy of Roman society (see Skinner).

In *Spartacus* one observes a variety of socio-sexual behaviors among male protagonists. Strong heroes such as Spartacus, Varro, and Gannicus are in par with the latest positive and heteronormative paradigms of lover, father, and husband roles found in previous sword-and-sandal films (see Pierce 40-57). Beyond such strict, heteronormative models, however, one observes a further, unconventional potpourri of heroic masculinities. Barca, for example, is on close, respectable terms with Crixus and acts as one of Batiatus’ most loyal gladiators as well as his bodyguard, often sent on assignments without his *dominus*. He is generally seen as powerful, is called “the Beast of Carthage,” and although he enjoys the discomfort of new recruits, he develops strong bonds with other gladiators. Most importantly, he reveals a gentler side with his partners, Auctus and Pietros, fighting for their freedom, displaying loyalty and straight-forward affection.

Similarly, in *Spartacus: Vengeance* and *War of the Damned*, Agron appears as one of the top generals of the rebel group that Spartacus leads. His relationship with the Assyrian Nasir, and the occasional intimate kisses they share throughout the series, do not undermine their respective skills in battle and heroism against the noblemen of Capua. They embrace a communal ideology for the sake of the group (brotherhood). Their sexuality is not defined as deviant, or unnatural, by their fellow rebels. When Mira, for example, finds them kissing instead of guarding Ilithyia (“Balance”), she simply relieves them from their duty. In *Spartacus*, then, heroism and positive masculinity is not defined by means of sexual preference.

On the other hand, negative paradigms of behavior, villains in the series, are defined primarily by their lack of respect towards others manifested via enforced acts and unrelated to sexual preference. The series alludes to both contemporary as well as ancient
concepts of socio-sexual deviance. Socially unacceptable sexual behavior in a Roman context was enforcing one’s desires on another. Again, during the Republic, a Roman citizen’s political liberty (*libertas*) was defined in part by the right to preserve his body from physical compulsion, including both corporal punishment and sexual abuse, though this was obviously not the case for everyone in an economy based on slavery. No moral censure was directed at the sexual preferences of adult males, as long as they did not violate the rights and prerogatives of their male peers.

Indeed, in *Spartacus* similar rules apply. Less sympathetic characters are often characterized by a specific sort of sexual deviance that is unrelated to sexual preference. Cossutius, Ashur, and Tiberius often force others to pleasure them, whether through violent means or through status. *Spartacus*’ depiction of negative masculinities is not defined by sexual preference but by sexual dominance and enforcement of their sexual desire on others. For example, the Roman noble Cossutius (“Paterfamilias”) is brought to the house of Batiatus by Varus, to attend sexual displays. Cossutius chooses Lucretia’s virgin slave Diona and pairs her with the rather brutal, dirty, and bloody gladiator Rhaskos. Cossutius justifies his actions as essential in teaching Diona that “this world is filled with the grotesque and the divine” (“Paterfamilias”). Once he rapes her, Cossutius and Varus immediately leave the *ludus*. Diona emerges from the room, visibly bruised and broken. Cossutius’ lack of empathy and compassion for the young woman, as well as the fact that he is brutally dominant by means of status, paint him as an unsympathetic character.

Deviance in the series is not restricted to noble Romans assaulting slaves; it also appears as a consequence of elevating in the society of Capua and a display of dominance and power. Ashur in *Blood and Sand*, when promoted in the villa as Batiatus’ right hand, requests to have Naevia, although he is aware that she romantically involved with Crixus.
Although there is no depiction of direct violence, it is implied that sexual acts are enforced upon Naevia. Ashur’s further elevation of status enables him to act in a similar way in *Vengeance*, thus manipulating more characters with violence and threats. Ashur manages to earn trust with Glaber and, as a result, he convinces Lucretia that he has more power than her, and rapes her multiple times. He calls her “my love” and offers her the jewels he has stolen from people he has killed, while he continues to express himself through possessiveness and violence. The shift in both characters’ status enables his dominant and enforcing behavior.

Along similar lines, violent behavior and rape can also appear as a manifestation of dominance between characters of similar status. For example, in *War of the Damned* young Tiberius evolves as a villain of great significance. After his father forces him and the rest of his unit to perform decimation, he uses brutal and immoral methods in order to display the hegemony he believes his father has taken from him. First, he brutally rapes Kore as an act of revenge towards his father. When Caesar blackmails him over the rape, which caused great distress to Crassus, Tiberius smashes a flagon in Caesar’s face and attacks him. The praetorian guards that protect Tiberius restrain Caesar, who Tiberius then threatens and rapes. The act of rape between men of equal status is yet another example of malevolent behavior in the series and a brutal act of social dominance on behalf of Tiberius.

Masculinity in *Spartacus*, therefore, deviates from strict heteronormative constructs found in previous sword-and-sandal films. Surely the muscular warrior is still a focus, and an abundance of “positive masculinities” are distributed between the protagonists; however, heroism is not defined by one’s sexual preference in strict binary terms. Villains are not those who deviate from strict heteronormative models but rather those who exercise hegemonic or physical powers over others. In this sense, the series
utilizes historical detail in depicting ancient sexualities. Concepts of sexual deviance are defined by levels of agency, consent, and enforcement and are not strictly dependent on modern definitions of sexual preference. However, the series is equally interested in modernizing sexual relationships rather than being historically accurate. This is evident in the fact that sexual relationships are romanticized and central to the plot in several ways, for example fighting for one’s lover (see Agron and Nasir, Barca and Auctus) or promoting loyalty among the servile class as a virtue. The novelty of *Spartacus* in its depiction of masculinities is that negative qualities are manifested through sexual dominance and enforcement of their sexual desire on others. Along similar lines, the depiction of heroic femininity in *Spartacus* goes beyond the objectified female stereotype found in other sword-and-sandal films. To some extent, it is similarly tied to questions of power depicted either through physical prowess or status.

**Sexualized Hyper-Femininity and the Emergence of the Action Heroine**

In past decades important studies on the role of Roman citizens and “other” women (non-Roman, slaves, etc.) have shed light to the fluidity of concepts of femininity in antiquity. Indeed, micro-societies across the Roman empire were patriarchic and valued masculinity, which was then socially constructed as valor, political activity, and military prowess. Women in Rome had a limited public role and were less frequently mentioned than men by (male) contemporary historians. In this context, freeborn, elite women in Rome were citizens, though they could not vote or hold political office (Frier and McGinn 31–32 and 457). Yet while Roman women held no direct political power, those from wealthy or powerful families could and did exert influence through private negotiations (Milnor 278). Unfortunately, however, we know very little about women who were not prominent. Within a slave system, the majority of women in the Roman
Empire derived from the lower segments of society, of which our image is still incomplete. Nonetheless, it remains a popular subject of speculation for the artistic conceptualization and reconstruction of the female realm in sword-and-sandal films.

Throughout *Spartacus*, female characters of all social backgrounds gradually involve themselves in the male realm of the *ludus*. Unlike older gladiator-inspired films that are based primarily in carefully constructed hetero-normative and male-focused narratives, women comprise at least one third of the series’ characters and play a central role in the plot and outcome of *Spartacus*. Spartacus’ hatred of the Romans is presented in the series as the result of his wife’s unjust rape, capture, and death. Moreover, the plot of the television series deals with micro-historic aspects of life in the provinces of the Roman Empire which enables further the use of female characters. It entails leitmotifs of domestic economy, the roles of a *domina* and slaves in the ancient household, religion, social interaction, and indirect engagement with politics. In the series, wealthy noble Roman women and female slaves have equally important parts. Romans like Gaia, Lucretia, and Ilithyia are central to the plot: their drive for power and social recognition urges them to act according to their own aspirations, sometimes contrary to their surrounding patriarch’s wishes. In the same breath, female slaves are also of great importance. They join the slave rebellion, most notably Mira, Naevia, and later Saxa; these are cast in terms of manly virtue as they espouse the cause of Spartacus in seeking freedom.

In *Spartacus* one can observe a plethora of portrayals of female characters; some of these are stereotypical in sword-and-sandal films while others expand beyond the qualities of womanhood usually found in the genre. As with most sword-and-sandal films, many characters are scantily clad and subject to the spectators’ gaze (see discussion by Schubart 224-30). The concept of sexy (action) heroines is certainly not something new
to the producers of Spartacus, especially for Rob Tapert, who was also the producer of *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995-7). Xena, like Naevia and Saxa in *War of the Damned*, is also dressed in a tight and short leather outfit, and one could argue that films typically re-enact male domination of women by objectifying the heroine, using strong definitions by early feminist film theorists such as voyeurism, sadism, and the fetishistic representation of the female image (Minkowitz 74-7). The male viewer can identify with the active power of the erotic look of the male protagonist (see discussion by Inness 1-17).

The argument that females tend to be objectified more than males, although reductionist, describes accurately certain features of stereotypical sword-and-sandal films. However, in a post-feminist reading one could also argue that the hyperbole of signifiers, the exposed skin, breasts, long legs, and athletic thighs, coupled with action and the very challenging of male strength, may be also read as a critique of sexual difference and power (Morgan 119, 131). In *Spartacus*, female gladiators’ costumes appear specifically designed to evoke the masculine world of fighting, yet at the same time to reveal the female hero’s natural physique. Their femininity underscores their prescribed gender code while their aggressiveness challenges it.

Another representational trait that falls into standardized femininity in sword-and-sandal film is, most certainly, the ability for female action heroines to scheme against others (women or their patriarchs). Elite female characters in the series indeed, exercise power behind the scenes. This is on par with a stereotypical representation of elite Roman women as scheming, corrupt, selfish, and with hegemonic tendencies. For example, the characters of Atia, Servilia, and Octavia in HBO’s series *Rome* (2005-7) are part of a long tradition of using Roman upper class women to illustrate the corruption of Roman society (Ragalie 4-6). Indeed, scheming women have been a part of literature and popular culture since the dawn of recorded text. In Roman literature the scheming, sexually
voracious, and uncontrollable woman is often used as a negative paradigm. Tacitus and other writers such as Dio Cassius and Suetonius used Messalina’s sexual voracity to illuminate the corruption and decay of the Roman Empire rather than to represent accurately historical womanhood in Rome (Joshel 221-54). As a result, the idea of using women’s behavior to represent the corruption of the Roman Empire has become a common device in both ancient and contemporary portrayals; such influence can be found in novels such as *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, published in 1934 and written by Robert Graves. Graves depicts Rome as a “stagnant pool sexually and politically” while the hegemonic shrewd behavior and lack of chastity of the women of the imperial house (Messalina, Agrippina, Livilla, and Julia) are represented as symptomatic of a larger corruption of these women (Joshel 123). The subsequent television series *I, Claudius* brings voracious, hegemonic, and corrupt women at the forefront of its plot. 

In *Spartacus*, one observes the same scheming behavior, a tendency to control behind the scenes, facilitated by immense sexuality and motivated by hegemonic tendencies. Yet the first distinction between the series and older depictions of these same characters is that, in *Spartacus*, women often come together to resist patriarchal order. Lucretia, the central elite character of the first three seasons, pairs with Gaia and Ilithyia, two prominent Roman women, on different occasions. In *Gods of the Arena*, Gaia is portrayed as a manipulative hyper-female with few inhibitions. As a widow of substantial wealth with no family, she stands as the only free woman in the series, who would otherwise be under the control of her father, brothers, or husband. Gaia first helps Lucretia and Batiatus with their business by luring the wealthy Varus to their household and securing his favor for house of Batiatus. With Gaia’s help, Lucretia and Batiatus organize an evening of events, inviting many men and offering them slaves and gladiators to spend the evening with. When Gaia is eventually killed by Tullius, Lucretia swears
vengeance. The relationship between Gaia and Lucretia goes beyond a mere friendship, with the two of them being physically intertwined at times. In any case, they are mostly successful in their co-operation, and they do play a critical part in the plot’s outcome.

Another example of the elite scheming woman in the series is Ilithyia, whose hatred for Spartacus certainly fuels myriad gruesome murders. In Blood and Sand, she manages to convince her own sponsored gladiator, Segovax, to make an attempt on Spartacus’ life, and she remains emotionally unmove when he is caught and crucified as punishment. In the same season she seduces Numerius by joining him naked in a pool. She asks him to choose Varro to fight Spartacus instead of Crixus, so that Varro will die. In Vengeance, Ilithyia is scheming to seduce and marry someone more prestigious than Glaber, and for that she seeks the help of Lucretia. Overall, however, Ilithyia’s friendship to Lucretia springs from self-interest, and she does not hesitate to abandon her if that serves her purpose.

The true novelty of the series is that Ilithyia is a villain who displays agency and is not only scheming behind the scenes, but also commits acts of raw violence. Unlike other film inspired by antiquity, where violent acts are premeditated by prominent women but executed by men (see Atia in Rome or female acts in Conan the Destroyer if we are strictly discussing sword-and-sandal film), Ilithyia inflicts violent acts upon others herself. Upon Licinia’s secret decision to bed Spartacus, Ilithyia asks to sleep with Crixus; this angers Lucretia, who, however, is instructed by her husband to ensure Glaber’s patronage at any costs. Spartacus is painted and masked in preparation to meet Licinia, but instead is paired with Ilithyia, also masked. Unaware and discovered by Licinia, Ilithyia falls into a rage and attacks Licinia, smashing violently her skull into the marble. Ilithyia’s realization that the death of a noble Roman woman might have consequences on her causes the balance of the relationship between the two noble Roman
women to change, with Lucretia becoming the dominant one. In *Vengeance*, Ilithyia traps and eventually assassinates her husband’s lover, Seppia. The corporeal ways Ilithyia manifests violence in the series when she attacks Licinia and Seppia are examples of physicality that, ultimately, advances sword-and-sandal femininity. Ilithyia utilizes both her prominent position, sexuality, as well as brutal violence to serve her own purpose, a combination unique to *Spartacus*. She takes the paradigm of the scheming Roman female a step further: she is a cruel, premeditating killer.

The producers of *Spartacus* have argued that representations of strong, physical femininity are on par with those of Joss Wheedon, creator of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), namely action heroines who can fight *and* think at the same time. The action heroine paradigm is indeed strongly represented in the series, as there are numerous different portrayals of powerful women with a special focus on physicality. The presence of physical women in the narrative and material cultures of antiquity is rare. Heroism and warlike physicality is not expected from a woman, especially in patriarchal, ancient societal structures, where they primarily belong to the realm of mythology rather than reality. Normally, the depiction of militant females fighting against men in such milieus remains unique to mythological characters, such as the Amazons (Tyrrell 77).

For *Vengeance*, the producers of *Spartacus* speculated the incorporation of a *gladiatrix*, a female gladiator. Historically, female gladiators appear 100 years later than Spartacus and they are a type of entertainment somewhat saucier than the male *ludi*. Female gladiatrices in *Spartacus* are oppressed slaves (Naevia and Mira) who join the slave commune and rebellion. Naevia and Mira acquire skills in battle with the help of their male counterparts. In *Vengeance*, Mira proves herself skillful with bow, joining the battle with the other slave rebels. Naevia is a household-born slave who, after Melitta’s death, becomes Lucretia’s personal body slave in *Gods of the Arena*. Naevia appears at
first reserved, yet after implied sexual abuse and hard labor in the mines, she trains to become a fighter with the other rebels. Naevia’s physical fragility is manifested in several ways, especially when she encounters Ashur and struggles to decapitate him, yet seems relieved by her obsessive thirst to kill Romans. Plus, while at the end of *Vengeance* a traumatized Naevia struggles in a fight, she evolves into a capable warrior by *War of the Damned* who emasculates and defeats Tiberius before an audience. Last, but certainly not least, Saxa is a unique example of a female character who appears in the series already (and, as the series suggests, perhaps culturally) prepared for battle, rather than being depicted as having been trained by a male counterpart to do so (like Mira and Naevia). She possesses an aggressive, powerful personality like the other Germanic fighters in the series. Unlike most of the other female characters, Saxa appears already battle-hardened and skilled, fighting with twin daggers, while also showing dexterity in unarmed combat. She enjoys challenging men to battle, wanting to prove that her strength is on par with theirs. Saxa clearly has a high rank in Spartacus’ army, and, dies in the final battle with Crassus, fighting alongside Gannicus. Overall, female heroines in *Spartacus* are central to the series’ action and plot and they portray a new form of femininity: that of the action heroine.

In its representation of action heroines and specifically freedom fighters, *Spartacus* follows more or less the very same stereotypes found in other action films that feature female fighters. Female (action) heroines appear to be relational and comparable to male characters: they are trained by men, they try to prove themselves better than them, or they are avenging men for their own misfortunes. What distinguishes the fighters in *Spartacus* is the fact that they physically fight for social equality, embracing the group’s solidarity, much like the male fragmented hero. Furthermore, there is not just one, but many women, who are active and physical. In the very few third-wave *pepla* that
embraced women—Red Sonja, or the Grace Jones character in the Conan sequel—there is only one action character. Yet Spartacus has Naevia, Mira, and Saxa, and they are all capable warriors.

So, is Spartacus gender equal? In associating and interpreting physical power exclusively with males and passivity exclusively with females, if anything, one reinforces binary gender models. The emergence of the premeditating, physical, and often cruel female action heroines in popular culture generated a deep debate in feminist and post-feminist scholarship. The female action hero in male film genres is an ambiguous entity. She can be both rejected and welcomed, as she often both hypersexualized and physically strong at the same time. Recent scholarship discusses the female action hero’s ambivalence and the responses she generates for the audience. In Spartacus, however, there are several types of the new woman warrior, a polysemous image that may offer a lot of possibilities for alternative storytelling, even if it has its limitations as a model for feminism (Early and Kennedy 6).

Conclusion

As I have noted, Spartacus differs from previous sword-and-sandal narratives in how it weaves concepts of gender and sexuality into the plot. In terms of portrayal, contemporary visual renderings of the genre’s hero and heroine still focus largely on their bodies, masculine and feminine. As intentionally organized materiality, the body and its possible enactments are both conditioned and circumscribed by socio-temporal conventions. In other words, the body is an historical situation and, thus, a manner of dramatizing and reproducing historical situations. Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies, “the stylistics of existence” (Butler 15). Strong, athletic bodies are bared and tanned; they are desired and powerful. Just like the actual audience of an arena, the
audience of *Spartacus* is invested in the object of their gaze: athletic feminine bodies and developed, muscular men. Actual power, though, as defined in the series, goes beyond mere embodiment and extends into the sphere of societal hierarchies, physical strength, solidarity within groups, and their refined dynamics.

Unlike older samples of the genre, *Spartacus*’ depictions of masculinities and femininities vary and remain unaffected by sexual preference, while female characters do not operate solely as passive décor. The emphasis on social domination in the series seems to reflect scholarly expressions of Roman (male) sexuality in terms of an “active and passive” binary model. The “passive” agent in a sexual relationship threatened the partners’ liberty as a free citizen as well as one’s sexual integrity. Indeed, throughout *Spartacus*, the lower the status (slaves, gladiators), the more readily available for passive, objectified, physical sexuality, conditions that are reversed once the tables are turned in the final season and the servile class gains power. Against this backdrop, gender in *Spartacus* indeed matters less than in previous sword-and-sandal depictions. Characters in *Spartacus*, irrespective of gender, display hegemony by means of physicality, status, or solidarity, or a combination of all these qualities.

Historical reproduction in popular culture is a way of narrating the past through its representational elements as well as a manifestation and materialization of the ongoing construction process of social and cultural identities. Accordingly, focus should be placed on uncovering interrelations and frictions between historical and popular culture. Similarly, popular expressions of antiquity film are not just “reflecting reality” but instead co-constitute within specific contexts according to particular relations of power (Foucault 376-7). The testing of these foundations, as well as its extension through to the theoretical edifice, prove that social knowledge (and consequently social realism in film) can sometimes operate as a historically current situated social practice. In any case one
can imply that the representation of gender in *Spartacus* moves away from a traditionalist point of view that sees male characters as fighters, fathers, and husbands and women as sexually objectified subordinate tokens. Sexuality in the series is defined in broad and contemporary terms.

Owing to the pervasive and increasingly interconnected nature of popular culture, *Spartacus* indeed mirrors both Roman and current discourses on gender representation, and it can be further used to discuss the complex mechanisms of visual narratives of historically situated social identities within the sphere of popular culture. Fictionality as a cooperative art of communication between creator and audience—a formation of a propositional content which becomes the focus of a special kind of imaginative effort among participants (Lamarque and Olsen 74)—thus projects a far better outlook of gender within *Spartacus* than older sword-and-sandal narratives. The very construction of the cognitive realm of ancient social culture is then altered from within the adaptation of its basic components. It thus provides a “Trojan horse” through which embodiment from the sphere of current reality is carried into the domain of augmented social realism in film. Hence, and most importantly, *Spartacus* becomes a platform, an arena for the discussion of social equalities once more, yet here the social justice is viewed from both a sexuality and gender perspective.

Notes
2. Hardwick briefly discusses the variable receptions of the Spartacus’ story within the context of sword-and-sandal films. For Kubrick’s film, see Winkler.

3. The series was directed by Robert Dornhelm and produced by Ted Kurdyla from a teleplay by Robert Schenkann. It aired over two nights on the USA Network. However, the 2004 series follows Howard Fast’s novel more closely than Kubrick’s film.

4. Dyer’s study indeed inaugurated the paradigm in film and cultural studies as it precisely registered the theoretical background to discuss “whiteness” in other areas of cultural inquiry. Ever since then, whiteness as a field of inquiry has been challenged (see Ahmed for a criticism of whiteness studies). In the case of sword-and-sandal films, indeed, one could argue for exotic, tanned, southern European identities rather than Dyer’s rigid definition of white. While this is the subject perhaps of an entirely different essay, for the sake of economy here, one could simply isolate the fact that Dyer identified correctly the centrality of the concept of the male muscleman in sword-and-sandal films, irrespective of complexion/racial theories.

5. See Augoustakis and Gruen; also Renger and Solomon.

6. Similar to the trends that HBO’s Rome (2005-7) follows in stretching the portrayal of microhistory through the imaginary reconstruction of the lives of two Roman soldiers, Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus, as found in Gaius Julius Caesar, Commentarii De Bello Gallico 5.44. A similar trend can be found in exhibitions and museums, using a fictional or lesser known historical individual as a “guide” into both the physical exhibit and the historical past presented therein (see for example: Life and Death in Pompey at the British Museum: 2013.)

Works Cited


