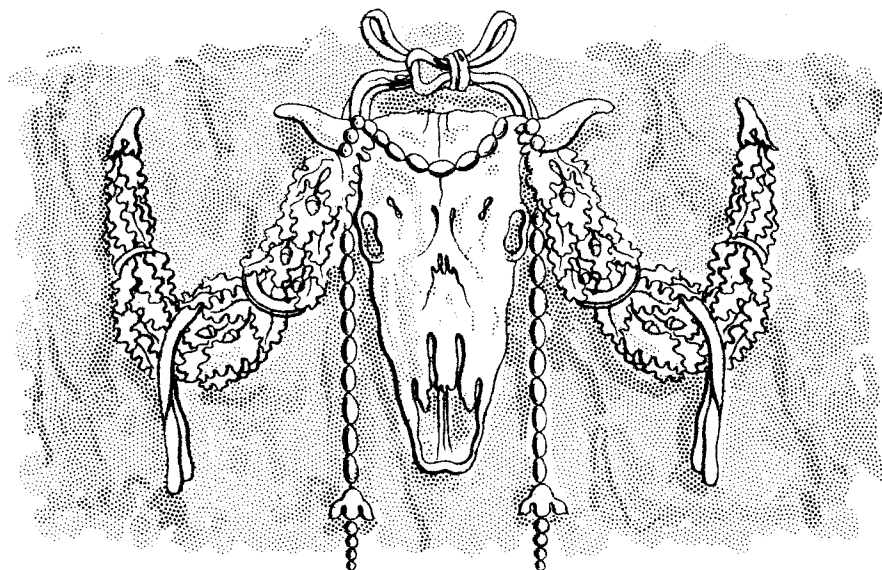


SHADOW PLAY

# CROSSING THE RUBICON

by Martha Bayles



WHEN STAGING A PRODUCTION OF Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the first thing one must decide is how to slant it, because the play's sympathies are quite evenly divided between the conspirators, especially Brutus, who persuade themselves that assassinating Caesar will restore the Republic, and the Caesarians, who get the best lines (Mark Antony), not to mention the victory (Octavian). It is possible to slant the play by cutting it, of course. But it is better to do so through interpretation.

Or one can keep *Julius Caesar* idling in neutral, as Joseph L. Mankiewicz did when adapting it for the big screen back in 1953. At that time, the "swords and sandals" epic was part of Hollywood's counteroffensive against TV, so the emphasis was on spectacle: scarlet Roman legions against the rocky terrain of Italy (or Los Angeles County); white marble vistas stretching to the matte-painted horizon; vast interiors decorated in a style best described as Il Duce Does Vegas. Thanks to the self-imposed censorship of the production code, popularly known as the Hays Code (after Postmaster Will H. Hays, who administered it between 1922 and 1945), these epics were also free of all bodily fluids except the occasional trickle of blood, sweat, or tears. Likewise politics: not until 1960, when Dalton Trumbo emerged from behind his many fronts to write *Spartacus*, did the epic become "swords, sandals, and socialism."

Personally, I am still waiting for Hollywood to tackle the Gracchis, those notorious price-fixing, land-distributing tribunes who a century before Caesar introduced a fateful note of direct democracy into the Roman Republic. If today's Trumbos would read some history and stop obsessing on how the oil industry caused 9/11, they would see the cinematic potential

"Rome"  
HBO Drama Series

Created by John Milius, William Macdonald, and Bruno Heller.

Written by Bruno Heller, John Milius, David Frankel, William J. Macdonald, Alexandra Cunningham, and Adrian Hodges.

Directors include: Michael Apted, Allen Coulter, Julian Farino, Jeremy Podeswa, Alan Poul, Mikael Salomon, Steve Shill, Alan Taylor, and Timothy Van Patten.

of the Gracchis—especially since there is now no production code to forbid showing Tiberius Gracchus getting clubbed to death, or even better, his brother Gaius being decapitated by thugs on the aristocrats' payroll, who then proceeded to pour molten lead into his skull and murder 3,000 of his followers without trial.

## Getting Rome Right

IF YOU'RE STILL READING OUT OF SHEER ZEST for Roman ferocity, then by Jove, do I have the TV series for you! HBO's *Rome* (co-produced by the BBC) is not the first swords and sandals epic to remind us, in graphic terms, what those handsome swords were actually used for. The pioneer here was *Gladiator* (2000), Ridley Scott's hugely popular film about a power struggle between Maximus, a fictional general chosen by the emperor Marcus Aurelius to succeed him, and Commodus, the emperor's sick kitty of a son. There is a smidgeon of politics in this muddy bloodbath, but it consists only of a senator named Gracchus (get it?) who 220 years after the death of Julius Caesar still dreams of restoring the Republic.

The first season of *Rome* aired last year, and while it is not yet available on DVD, it can be accessed "on demand" (meaning the customer must pay extra and be a computer geek to boot). Is HBO going to rebroadcast the first season? There are rumors to that effect, but apparently the date and time are classified information. Will there be a second season? There is some dispute about this, owing to high production costs and the fact that viewers have not yet clamored for *Rome* as they have for the *Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*.

Give the viewers a chance, I say. *Rome* is no harder to follow than *Deadwood* and a whole lot more rewarding. Not only is it one of the best

TV series ever made, it is also one of the best screen portrayals of Rome, surpassing a whole herd of Hollywood sacred cows. In part, this is due to smarter production values. Rome has always been costly: in 1925 MGM spent \$3.9 million on the first *Ben-Hur*; in 1959 it spent \$15 million on the second; and in 2000 Dreamworks coughed up nearly \$150 million for *Gladiator*. The budget for *Rome* is \$100 million, but considering that this paid for 12 hours not just two or three, it seems to me the money was spent exceedingly well.

The five-acre set, built in cooperation with Cinecittà Studios near Rome, recreates the real ancient city, not some immaculate MGM (or Albert Speer) pipe dream. Rome in the 50s B.C. was a funky place, with every inch of marble decorated with colorful paintings, proclamations, and graffiti, and every twisting street jammed with busy artisans and merchants. From the palatial villas on the Palatine Hill to the polluted alleys of the Aventine, where the poor scraped by in five- and six-story tenements that were cesspools below and firetraps above, the whole city is conjured with marvelous verisimilitude. The same is true of the props and costumes, from the women's looms to the soldiers' leather cuirasses and brass helmets. All were made by skilled Italian artisans like Luca

Giampaoli, the latter-day Vulcan who hand-hammered Caesar's breastplate.

### Skillful History

**O**F COURSE, NONE OF THIS WOULD matter if the screenplay and acting were on the historically tone-deaf level of most Hollywood fare. But here *Rome* compares favorably with *I, Claudius* (1976), the BBC's brilliant adaptation of the Robert Graves novel about the vexed problem of succession under the first four emperors; and with *Julius Caesar* (2003), a little known but fine miniseries directed by Uli Edel for Turner Network Television, which among other charms features a stirring reenactment of the battle of Alesia, in which Caesar's army of 55,000 outfoxed 250,000 Gauls led by the great shaggy Vercingetorix.

If it's battles you want, then don't miss the first episode of *Rome*, which opens with a brief but authentic depiction of the Legio XIII Gemina waging the grimly efficient warfare that enabled the Romans to conquer wild-and-woolly foes like the Gauls, whose manner of fighting was, shall we say, freestyle. This sequence shows such Roman techniques as the sword-thrust through a tightly packed wall of shields, and the

constant rotation of fresh troops to the deadly front line. Unfortunately, someone was pinching the *denarii*, because in the whole 12 hours there is no comparable battle scene, only a clash in the civil war between Caesar and Pompey that, after an impressive build-up, comes as a major let-down, a cheesy blur that evokes not history but the History Channel.

But if it's compelling characters you crave, and the aroma of truth found in good historical fiction, then don't miss a single hour of *Rome*. To start with the wholly fictional characters, the most accessible are probably two soldiers who begin as enemies and slowly become comrades: the severe centurion Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd) and the brash infantryman Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson). (These two names are mentioned in Caesar's *Gallic Commentaries*, but the characters are invented.) Vorenus is an old-fashioned fellow, whose Stoic *virtus* and Republican sympathies harden him to his family after long separation, but also outclass the eroding *dignitas* of most of the patricians he meets. Pullo is the son of a slave woman, so what matters to him is the *libertas* of the plebeian soldier.

Also fictionalized are two aristocratic women, Servilia of the Junii, mother of Marcus Junius Brutus (yes, *that* Brutus) and (a few rungs down the social ladder) Atia of the Julii, niece of Julius Caesar and mother of Octavia (later wife of Mark Antony, spurned for Cleopatra) and Octavian (later Augustus, first emperor of Rome). The gloriously twisted soap opera that unfolds within, and between, these two households would be impossible to summarize here. But it's worth noting how well it reveals the political intrigues festering on the home front. Not since Livia in *I, Claudius* has the distaff side of Roman ruthlessness been so skillfully portrayed.

Both Servilia and Atia existed, but little is known about their lives. Servilia (Lindsay Duncan) is remembered for her lineage and for an affair that she had with Julius Caesar. Atia (Polly Walker) is just a name in the history books, so the writers have shrewdly transformed her from a low-profile Roman matron into a high-profile bombshell resembling Clodia Metelli, the patrician party animal whose numerous lovers included the poet Catullus. If there is a villain in *Rome*, it is probably Atia, whose promiscuity, nudity, and eager participation in a ritual sacrifice that drenches her with bull blood are highlighted in the first two episodes.

If you are one of those viewers who recoil at HBO-style sex and violence, then be warned that *Rome* contains a good dose of both. Is it gratuitous? Maybe a little. But, I am tempted to say, this is *Rome*! Staying with Atia for a moment, if I hadn't read Catullus' obscene, tender,

## "The finest short biography of Mozart that I know—

incisive, insightful, and elegantly written. If I had to recommend one book that explained the man and his music, this would be it."

—Cliff Eisen,  
Department of Music,  
King's College London

### "A splendid introduction to Mozart's life and works—

carefully organized, sensibly argued, and lucidly written. Rushton brings his vast knowledge of Mozart into the biographical arena and succeeds admirably in writing for both the layman and the connoisseur of Mozart's music."

—Simon P. Keefe,  
Professor of Music at City University  
London, and editor of *The Cambridge  
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hilarious poems about Clodia (whom he called Lesbia, *sans* the modern connotation), and about the mating and quarreling habits of his fellow patricians more generally, I might have ascribed the more lurid bits in *Rome* to the cutthroat competitiveness of the cable TV industry. But no, stuff like this really happened, and should properly be ascribed to the cutthroat competitiveness of the Roman plutocracy.

### Ancient Virtues

IF ROME HAS A WEAKNESS, IT IS THE same weakness that, in the view of Cato, Cicero, and other eminent anti-Caesarians, brought down the Republic: failure to respect the ancient aristocratic virtues. It is, of course, hardly surprising that aristocratic virtue should get short shrift on HBO, that bastion of Emmy-winning populism. The co-creators and executive producers of this series include four Americans (John Milius, Frank Doelger, William J. MacDonald, and HBO vice president Anne Thomopoulos). The talented writers and directors include veterans of such plebe-pleasing fare as *Sex and the City*, *Entourage*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

But one also finds a healthy supply of Brits, including director Michael Apted (president, since 2003, of the Directors Guild of America), co-creator and writer Bruno Heller, and almost all of the cast, including the formidable Irish actor Ciaran Hinds as Caesar and the enigmatic newcomer Max Pirkis as Octavian. These individuals are not aristocrats—heaven forbid! But coming as they do out of British theater, film, and TV, they know how to fake it. Ever since Shakespeare, Roman patricians have been speaking the Queen's English and plebeians Cockney. No one defends class distinctions any more, but as long as they remain embedded in the Brits' acting tradition, their Romans will come off as more convincing than ours.

All the more astonishing, then, to see Cato and Cicero come off as a scold and a fussbudget, respectively. Leaving aside the evidence that Cato drank too much and Cicero's finest moments were never quite as fine as his oratory made them sound, these two figures should be weighty enough to hold down the republican side of the argument—and here they are not. Cato (Karl Johnson) is a bony old grouch who makes a strong speech in the beginning but spends the rest of the time kvetching. When he

finally stabs himself at Utica, the music swells as if it were a big deal, but it is hard to know why, since this Cato is more dyspeptic than Stoic. As for Cicero, it was a mistake to cast David Bamber in the part. I hate to typecast actors, but if this was Bamber's big chance to leave behind his best known role, that of the insufferable Mr. Collins in the 1995 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, he blew it. Cicero was the world's greatest orator, not a country parson.

The Republic was tottering long before Julius Caesar gave it the final shove. But it did hold Rome together for nearly 500 years, and for much of that time it was the world's sole alternative to absolute monarchy. Cato's and Cicero's greatest fear was not that a gaggle of fat-cat senators would lose their perks (the main message here), but that Rome would succumb to being ruled in the same way as the Hellenistic kingdoms of the East: by despots with even more perks, among them the status of divinity and the right to demand not only obedience but worship.

### Possessing Power

FOR OUR MODERN DIFFICULTY IN GRASPING the Republican cause, I blame Shakespeare, who, despite his even-handedness in *Julius Caesar*, was a monarchist. (I would be, too, if Queen Elizabeth liked my plays.) The conspirator Brutus may have been "the noblest Roman of them all," according to Mark Antony, but consider who is left standing after the unpleasantness following Caesar's assassination: not high-minded Brutus, the noble master of miscalculation, but low-key Octavian, the quiet little dude who ends up calling the shots. And here we arrive at the very finest part of *Rome*: its double portrait of the strong man who did not become emperor, and of the weak boy who did.

The relationship between Caesar and Octavian is not made explicit; there is no male-bonding scene where the older man adopts the younger as his son, gives him his name, and makes him his heir. In fact, they rarely meet. But their separateness only reinforces their standing as the two poles around which everything else revolves. This being a story about a cataclysmic power struggle, it is only natural to ask who really does, and does not, possess power. And while everyone's attention is rightly fixed on Caesar's ability to grasp the lightning and store it in his own private bottle, it gradually becomes evident that Octavian is studying to do the same, if only

in the microcosm of his family. Caesar may be up against Cato, Cicero, and Pompey, but Octavian is up against Atia and his sister, and it's hard to say which proving ground is more rigorous.

Was Octavian's upbringing dominated by a scheming, deceitful mother? I don't know, but given how he turned out, it could have been. Indeed, some clever feminist scholar should write a book about how the first Roman emperor owed his ascendancy less to masculine will than to feminine wiles.

How did Octavian subdue the nobility and the Senate? By convincing them that he was restoring the Republic. Unlike Marius, Sulla, Crassus, Pompey, and his great uncle Julius, he avoided grandiose titles, preferring to call himself *princeps* (first among equals), the title Cicero gave to Cato. In 27 B.C., after defeating Antony and Cleopatra (who also had a thing about titles, naming their two children Sun and Moon), Octavian made a great show of returning his accumulated powers to the *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. True to their ancient constitution, the Senate accepted. But to show their appreciation, they awarded their humble consul a province consisting of half the world, 20 legions, a crown (for his door, not his head), and (of course) a new and even more grandiose title: Caesar Augustus. In other words, Octavian managed to wrap them all around his little finger.

This Rome fan would like nothing better than to see the same cast and crew, building on the costs already sunk into that fabulous set, props, and costumes, produce a second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh season, straight through to the conversion of Constantine. Imperial Rome has more ready-made storylines, full of lurid details, than even the most gifted HBO screenwriter has ever dreamed of. If HBO were a republic, I would head straight for the Campus Martius and cast my vote in the Ovile, where the Roman people used to elect their magistrates. But I won't get the chance, seeing as Augustus turned the Ovile into a venue for bread and circuses, reducing the *vox populi* to the roar of the mob. From the cheap seats, then, a thumbs-up: "Let Rome live!"

Martha Bayles, who teaches humanities at Boston College, joins the CRB as our columnist on television and film. Her film blog, *Serious Popcorn*, can be found at [ArtsJournal.com](http://ArtsJournal.com). She is writing a book titled *The Ugly American: Losing the Global Culture War*.

# CONSTITUTION OR TYRANNY

by Mark Helprin



IN FEAR OF A THOMAS, SCALIA, ROBERTS, ALITO ORIGINALIST COUP de main, and with extraordinary brilliance—for her—Senator Dianne Feinstein recently expressed this view of strict constructionism: “Women would not be provided equal protection under the Constitution, interracial marriages could be outlawed, schools could still be segregated and the principle of one man, one vote would not govern the way we elect our representatives.”

Leaving aside the bizarre notion that originalists fail to recognize that Constitutional amendments govern—which, of course, by the Constitution’s original command they do—her plaint is only the blunt tip of a long and freighted spear. Quite simply, the Left openly disdains the Constitution when it frustrates even the most transient of their preferences.

For them, it is a benighted 18th-century document that can be interpreted to mean the opposite of what it states, and is best elasticized into meaninglessness, the void of which they cover with a thatch of legislative decrees as thin as needles but as thick as fish in a crowded sea—a forest of forty, fifty, or sixty thousand closely leaved pages in which the fundamental powers of the people are lost and subsumed. This view comports with a Darwinian notion of the evolution of law, as in the English model that we did not choose; with a visceral distrust of tradition; with an interpretation of history that seeks even destructive progression and rejects even benevolent repetition; with hostility to certain principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, such as the recognition of rights pre-eminently in the individual; and with a frequently bitter disfavor of impediments to the bureaucratic drive or the immediate expression of popular will.

A case in point is the Left’s conviction that the 2000 presidential election was illegitimized by a constitutionally mandated electoral college that weighs votes unequally and thereby begs for abolition. By this logic, so does the Senate. So do the three branches of government, where a party with 51% of the vote may make 100% of the decisions. And so do the states. Is it fair, for example, that the people of Wyoming can make their own law, whereas the people of the Upper West Side must combine their aspirations with those of the primitive inhabitants of the Adirondacks?

In the 19th century, oil was transported in ships with hulls caulked to form a single chamber, and as their cargoes shifted with irresistible momentum these ships readily capsized. Naval architects then compartmentalized them so that their massive loads could not rush unchecked in reaction to the momentary condition of the sea. This is what the founders did in restraining the power of even self-government, and this is what those who recoil from the Constitution as it is actually written find most distressing.

In the name of efficiency, speed, and process, they chafe at those of its elements that frustrate the impulse of the moment, force compromise, or sidetrack action. But without these frustrations, which yet allow an energetic executive to act in time of emergency, we would find ourselves

in the presence of the kind of immediate, singular, untrammelled power of, for example, the king that George III might have become had he not been frustrated by the Magna Carta, the Common Law, Parliament, and the Atlantic Ocean.

THOUGH THEY CALL IT PROGRESSIVE, THEIR VISION OF GOVERNANCE predates the Constitution and favors the jealous power not of kings but, in their place, a kingly state in which the implicit ownership of all the realm is established not through vassalage but by an unlimited power of taxation, and in which corporate rights are vested not in feudal classes, guilds, aristocracy, and sects, but in race, ethnicity, and sex.

What stands in the way of this retrograde vision that would catapult Western civilization back to the autocracy, corporate rights, and cults of obedience from which it has gradually emerged over several thousand years? The Constitution, as it stands, a document that is by nature clarifying. Metaphorically, whereas the strict constructionist removes the accumulated scale so that original intent can be seen in depth and detail, advocates of a “living” Constitution bury it so deeply in layer upon layer that only the topmost gloss will govern according to the whims of the governors. And lest some jurist incapable of ordering principle over decree be forced to the embarrassment of ruling contrary to his prejudices, and thereby affirming the essence of law, they simply imagine a new Constitution every time they find it standing in the way.

Nor is strict construction, as it is often portrayed, inflexible or passionless, not that these need be disqualifying. Because the Constitution can be amended, it is perfectly flexible, though not hurriedly so. The telling difference between the liberally elastic document and the conservatively amendable one is that the latter demands the consent of the governed rather than that of a small juridical elite. And if the life of the “living” Constitution emanates from the regulatory song of the bureaucratic state, the life of the real Constitution arises in the passion of the Declaration, the First Organic Law of the United States, the minder and conscience of a Constitution ratified in compromise and forced to delay but not to deny the implementation of the Declaration’s self-evident truths. The unparalleled language of the Declaration, forged in war, draws its force from its postulates and intent, and its postulates and intent are unequivocal, the guide stars of the nation and its Constitution, as Lincoln, if not Dianne Feinstein, would attest.

And contrary to the senator’s thoughtless accusation, it is the originalist view—Lincoln’s view, the view of the Union dead—that, in fact, guarantees equal treatment under the laws, the preservation of individual rights, and the continuance of the republican form of government. For with the Constitution as it is actually written, many political outcomes are possible, but with a Constitution that is imagined day by day and hour by hour, all politics are tyrannical.