

## **OCTAVIU'S ETHOS IN THE TV SHOW *ROME* (HBO)**

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### **Abstract**

The present piece composes the framework known within the Classical Studies as a reception analysis, that is, a study that, as presented by Martindale (2006, p. 1-2), links the ancient world and other historical periods, showing that ancient discourses are not confined in their own time, having a complex chain of connections between them and the most diverse media, including television, as here it is analyzed. In this process, it is emphasized that the relations between the old statements and their later appropriations are produced at the point of reception, in which the reader is essential in the interpretive process. In this article, I look at the character Otavio from HBO's Rome series, seeking to highlight the application of an ethos proposed for the character, of an intelligent boy, prodigy, demonstrating an element already used in the Ancient literary tradition to make up the image of the future princeps. To do so, I use Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to argue about the process of creating the show, and I also make use of some ancient texts, such as Suetonius' Life of Augustus and Cicero's Phillipics.

### **Key-words**

Ancient Rome; Classical Studies; Classical reception; Octavian; Augustus; ethos; Rome (HBO)

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## Resumo

O presente trabalho compõe o quadro conhecido dentro dos Estudos Clássicos como uma análise de recepção, ou seja, um estudo que, como Martindale (2006, p. 1-2) apresenta, interliga o mundo antigo e outros períodos históricos, mostrando que os discursos antigos não ficam circunscritos em seu próprio tempo, havendo uma cadeia complexa de conexões entre eles e os mais diversos meios de difusão, entre eles a televisão, como é o nosso caso. Nesse processo, salienta-se que as relações entre os enunciados antigos e suas apropriações posteriores são produzidas no ponto de recepção, sendo o leitor essencial no processo interpretativo. Nesse artigo, analiso a personagem Otávio, da série Rome, da HBO, buscando evidenciar a aplicação do éthos proposto para a personagem, o de um garoto inteligente, prodígio, demonstrando que este se trata de um elemento já utilizado na tradição literária da Antiguidade para compor a imagem do futuro princeps. Para tal, utilizo o conceito de capital cultural, de Bourdieu, para argumentar sobre o processo de criação da série, e também lançaremos mão de alguns textos antigos, como as Filípicas, de Cícero, e a Vida de Augusto, de Suetônio.

## Palavras-chave

Roma Antiga; Estudos Clássicos; Recepção clássica; Otávio; Augusto; éthos; Rome (HBO)

The cinematographic world, from the art's first years, has presented a great interest in the Ancient World for its productions that range from adaptations of Greek tragedies, such as in the movie *Oedipus Rex* (1967) by Pier Pasolini, to the utilization of a various myths to create starting points, like the amazons in the *Wonder Woman* (2017) movie. This fact reveals, according to Galinsky (2007: 293), a "manifestation of the classical tradition's ongoing vitality." Beyond the movie screen, this interest has also been transmitted to TV: the famous and long-lasting series *Doctor Who*, during its second season, aired in 1965, used Nero's reign as a plot for four episodes. In the seventies there was *Up Pompeii!*, a comedy show whose plot was set in pre-eruption Pompeii and *I, Claudius*, with Roman emperor Claudius narrating the history of the beginning of the Roman Empire, from 24 CE until the year of his death in 54 CE. The miniseries *Quo Vadis* was released in the 80's; in the 90's, there were the popular series *Hercules* and *Xena*, and, more recently, in 2010, *Spartacus*; in 2018 two shows about the classical world were released: *Troy: Fall of a City* and *Britannia*. These are only a few examples of successful series, for there are still countless TV productions about the Ancient World that could be listed, including the documentary programs about curiosities of the past, based either on serious data or on phony suppositions.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, *Rome*, like the rest of the previously mentioned shows, is not a scientific production, in the sense that it is not about a discourse founded on references to the ancient data, read and debated through theories and methodologies selected by an individual or group that seeks to create more knowledge. Of course, it is not and that never was the goal of its creators. As affirmed by Jonathan Stamp (2015), BBC's historical consultant and co-producer of the show, about the preoccupation with research and the authenticity of the scenographic elements: "We were not, however, making a documentary. We were striving for authenticity because it enriches the experience of the drama for the viewer." However, that does not belittle the narratives and the different ways of speaking about the past, which is always a fabrication. It is true that, many times, these artistic narratives reach the general public in a much more effective way, so that it can have access to, discuss and imagine the Ancient World through the ecfastic illusion.

I propose here the analysis of Octavius in HBO's *Rome*, looking to show the application of *ethos* proposed by and for the character, of an intelligent boy, seemingly an element already used in the Ancient literary

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<sup>2</sup> In this, we include programs that belittle the historical-scientific production about the past, ignoring the technology of the ancient societies, preferring to attribute the construction of their most notable buildings to extraterrestrials.

tradition to make up the image of the *princeps*.<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that the *ethos* is one of the persuasive means to make a discourse, as described by Aristotle (*Rh.* 1356a, 4-7). The speaker should know how to construct his own image positively in his speech, as a way to make himself look prudent, virtuous and benevolent, which would grant strength and legitimacy to his speech. This concept, reshaped by Discourse Analysis, is relative to every discursive act, for the recipient is always driven to make his own image of the speaker, while the speaker is constantly striving to control the image that the listener is making of him. (Maingueneau, 2010: 79). Maingueneau (2010: 80) connects the voice of enunciation to the body of a social-historical individual, affirming that the discourse made by this individual, be it written or oral, is based on a selection of stereotypes that can be received as positive or negative. In this case, the assimilated stereotype is of the young genius.

Octavius, who becomes Rome's ruler by the end of the show, was not planned to be a simple character, a hero or a villain. Much of his *ethos* in the cinematographic enunciation deals with the previous *ethos* of the average viewer – it is worth remembering that the production is made by HBO, a premium television channel, thus making the target audience a portion of society that has enough financial resources to share in this cultural capital,<sup>4</sup> and having previous abstractions and conceptions about Rome, its emperors and so on. It is worth noting that many specialists of the Ancient World were invited to help make the show. As Prado (2012: 6) argues, in some moments of the show it is possible to see the screenwriters seeking to dialogue with a learned public. This can be perceived in scenes such as when Octavia, in the fourth episode of the first season, recites a few verses of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which had not yet been composed, since the poem was written under Augustus' Principate. By using this element, the screenwriters bring up an intertextual game, introducing in the scene an element that foresees the future success of the young woman's brother. This is an expedient used by Virgil himself in

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<sup>3</sup> "If the role of activating the allusion is up to the reader, taking this into consideration relativizes any positivistic intention of interpreting a text, which will no longer be the result of a discovery of something that was there to be unveiled, as an object to be revealed, but only a construction of reading made possible by elements of the text and woven by the analyst in a way that is only one of the countless possible ones" (Vasconcellos, 2007: 248). At the reception, the old material is always reinterpreted, according to the different readings, which means that something new is always said about the discourses of Antiquity.

<sup>4</sup> Cultural capital is everything that, through everyday practices linked to education, provides a series of symbolical goods shared by a certain group of individuals, which helps in the support of the hierarchy, seen that this capital unites them in the process of social distinction and legitimation (Bourdieu, 1985: 242 and ss.).

many moments of his poem, such as when he describes Priam's body lying in the Trojan coast (*Aen.* 2.557-8), a headless body, in a historical intertext with the destiny of Pompey, a Roman republican leader who suffered a similar tragedy in Egypt. According to Jane Tranter (2005), co-producer and BBC's historical consultant, it was of great importance to the producers that the highest level veracity was brought to the show, because BBC TWO's audience would be quite demanding about this aspect.

Thus, a viewer that has some knowledge of the period depicted by the show,<sup>5</sup> knowing the political outcome that culminated in the formation of a new regime, the Principate, will see some characteristics of the great political articulator in the young Roman,<sup>6</sup> such as his cunning and intelligence, from the very beginning. Furthermore, the *ethos* shown by Octavius in the series is built in a way to create some sympathy from the viewer, for it is the *ethos* of a precocious child, of a boy who, being extremely intelligent and well instructed, knows how to prudently ponder different situations, a proleptic of the future Roman emperor. I also underline that the character himself creates his own *ethos* by presenting himself as a boy of books, who prefers the game of political cunning rather than sword fighting.

In the first scene in which Octavius is presented to the public, in the pilot episode, the construction that will mark the character as the series unfolds is framed. Octavius is shown spying on his mother Atia, played by Polly Walker, who appears nude, bathing. The scene and dialogue are built to be strange in the contemporary viewer's eyes, for it shows the idea that it could be recurrent for the young Roman to observe the mother in such intimate moments, and she, carefree, expresses to the public that they do not consider such habits as repulsive. It is also a way for the show's scenography to mark a barrier between the contemporary and Antiquity, thus making the show more credible.

Octavius' *ethos* is shown since his first appearance as a boy who moves between serious and shy, a strategist and expert of Roman politics and its strife. Atia comments about having bought a horse and emphasizes her strategy of presenting it to Julius Caesar before all other Romans, to

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<sup>5</sup> The show's time frame is of a period greatly used by other media (literature, movies, theater, musicals), that is, the final years of the 1st century B.C.E, from the disputes between Pompey and Caesar to the rise of Octavius as ruler of Rome.

<sup>6</sup> Moreover, his youth was something which historical-Octavius, so to say, had to face during his political career, for it was initiated when he was 19 after being adopted through testament by Julius Caesar (McCarty, 1931: 363).

which Octavius answers by making a legal, social and political analysis. Moreover, Octavius is, at all times, holding a set of *tabellae*, small wooden tablets used for daily writing, for quick notes, a common studying supply for Roman students (LEITE, 2013: 90).<sup>7</sup> This is another symbolic element in the construction of the scenography to emphasize Octavius' erudition, something already present in ancient sources, both due to the known relationship of the Roman *princeps* with learned men, such as poets and philosophers, as well as to his routine of reading and writing.<sup>8</sup> According to Suetonius (*Aug.* 89), for example, Augustus (as Octavius was called after winning the title in 27 BCE) was a great enthusiast of literature and philosophy, mainly reading Latin or Greek works with precepts that could serve as examples for a good performance in the public life, and cultivating the habit of sending works to his commanders and relatives if he noticed that a work could serve as advice and model for them.<sup>9</sup> Suetonius (*Aug.* 84) also registers that the emperor never discoursed in public before preparing and writing with gravity and diligence. He would even write and take notes for serious conversations with friends or his wife, Livia. In the elaborate representation presented by this historian, the emperor was quite methodical and centered, as *Rome's* Octavius is: a character that does not act on impulse, always having strategies and insightful analysis of the steps being taken.

It is also worth noting that in this first scene a servant bumps into Octavius by accident, who responds by striking the servant, endorsing his place as a severe slaveholder, merciless even with small faults of his subordinates – something that is also present in the construction of the emperor's image as someone who was strict with his punishments.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> The *tabellae*, which could also be made of other materials, such as metal alloys or ivory, were hollowed in the middle, where they would receive a pigmented wax which, after dry, was used as a surface for writing with a *stylus*, an object with a sharp end and a rounded end, one for writing and one for erasing the registers when necessary. These *tabellae* could be joined in sets, with many tablets linked with leather straps (LEITE, 2013: 90). In the discussed scene, Octavius is apparently yielding a set of four *tabellae*, known as *quaternus*.

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, on the contrary, the character Mark Antony is built in a way to emphasize his rudeness, lack of sophistication and wit, just as the *triumvir* and general was characterized both by Cicero, in the *Phillipics*, and by Plutarch, in his *Parallel Lives*.

<sup>9</sup> Suetonius (*Aug.* 84-6) also registers that from early on Octavius dedicated himself to the study of eloquence and liberal arts with enthusiasm, having practiced declamations, for example, during periods of war. The author also lists a few books written by the emperor, analyzing his writing style.

<sup>10</sup> An example of this was Octavius' attitudes in the decade of 40 BCE, also portrayed by Suetonius (*Aug.* 14-15), in episodes in which the future emperor does not forgive his enemies defeated in war, punishing them with severe sentences, such as death. In other episodes such as in *The Ram Has Touched the Wall*, Octavius also appears as merciless

is reiterated, in the same episode, when one of the men who accompany Octavius in the dangerous endeavor of going to Gaul wakes him up by touching his shoulder, to which the future emperor responds: “don’t touch me without permission.” In the same way that Suetonius’ Octavius (*Aug.* 25) does not name his soldiers as companion-in-arms and even prohibited his family from doing so, the show’s Octavius keeps his austere aristocratic *ethos*, not accepting lapses with regards to social hierarchy. A touch of humor is brought to the situation when, after being captured by highwaymen, Octavius is finally freed by Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson) and Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd), two soldiers who, in the show, are characters who interfere in great political events. Octavius, in this scene, acting in the same snobbish way that is unique to him in the episode, talks in the following manner to Pullo: “I order you to release me this instant.” The soldier says that the boy was acting rude considering he was a slave, to which Octavius retorted describing the nobility of his family, stressing the initial order for Pullo to free him. Pullo, however, replies with “say please.” Embarrassed, Octavius is obliged to obey. Once free, he initiates a conversation with the two soldiers and begins to make a political analysis of the current situation, demonstrating his sophistication and intelligence, a characteristic that will be important to his character.

The way to demonstrate the passage of time and the development of the future Roman *princeps* in the show is significant: changing actors. Octavius was the only main character whose passage of time was signaled in such a way. During the first season, aired in 2005, Octavius was played by Max Pirkis, sixteen years old at the time. In the second season, aired in 2007, Simon Woods who, at the time, was twenty-seven years old, acts as this character. Such change is essential, since it uses an element present in the narrative of the show itself while also echoing a problem faced by the real Octavius when entering the Roman political scene after Caesar’s death: the reproach around his youth and inexperience. In the show, Octavius, after many misunderstandings and attempts at obtaining the inheritance that his great-uncle Julius Caesar (Ciáran Hinds) had left him in his testament, he has a violent fight with Mark Antony (James Purefoy). Octavius’ change to Augustus, according to Boyd (2008: 87), marks the change in the order associated with the TV character, who goes from a family to the other (from the Octavii to the Caesars) while the Roman world goes, roughly speaking, from the Republic to the Principate.

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such as when, inflexibly, he suggests torture and death for Niobe’s lover, surprising Titus Pullo with his coldness.

According to Cicero (*Phil.* 13.11.24-5), Antony, to belittle Octavius, frequently called him *puer*, boy. Cicero himself, however, uses the same adjective, along with *adulescens*, adolescent, in many occasions to refer to Octavius in contexts of praise and reproach. In the *Phillipics*, for example, he uses Octavius' youth to celebrate his attitudes who, although from a young one, contrasted with the ones by the older yet foolish Antony.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, in letters sent after Caesar's murder, when discussing with Atticus and Brutus about the political maneuver, Cicero emphasizes Octavius' youth to criticize his decisions.<sup>12</sup> Thus, depending on the context and the way it is used in the argumentation, Octavius' tender age can be rhetorically used as a positive or negative factor.

In Octavius' character's composition in *Rome*, his young age is emphasized at all times, so the viewer can identify that, although he is an intelligent boy, he still is primarily a frightened child who lives under the shadow of his mother and who has a dubious and affectionate relationship with his sister, with whom he sleeps. His older sister Octavia calls him "silly baby-brother" during a scene where she comforts an apprehensive Octavius before he leaves to Gaul to take the present to his great-uncle Caesar. In the following scene, Atia watches him ride a horse and prepare to leave, saying: "Is he not perfect? Proper little soldier," another one of many elements who contribute to the elaboration of the image of an inexperienced child character. At first, his youth is not something that brings him advantages in the show's plot.

In the second episode of the first season (*How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic*), Octavius is led back to Rome with a Roman legion. In the *Vrbs*, Antony dispenses the soldiers and orders Vorenus and Pullo to give Octavius back to Atia, calling him "boy." Atia, celebrating her son's return, also uses affectionate adjectives that emphasize the young boy's age, such as "baby boy" and "my poor rabbit." In the third episode, *An Owl in a Thornbush*, in the moment when Caesar performs the risky maneuver of advancing on Rome with his legions, Atia, enraged by the

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<sup>11</sup> Cicero (*Phil.* 4.3) asks that the senators greatly thank Octavius, who he calls a teenager or a boy. In the *Phillipic* 5.49, Cicero argues about how the relationship between the Senate and Caesar would have been different if he had been his adopted son, once again referred to as a teenager.

<sup>12</sup> Cicero (*Att.* 16.8) writes Atticus about the oncoming war between Antony and Octavius in the following terms: "*quem autem sequamur? vide nomen, vide aetatem. atque a me postulat primum ut clam conloquatur mecum vel Capuae vel non longe a Capua. puerile hoc quidem, si id putat clam fieri posse.*", "But whom are we to follow? Look at his name, look at his age [referring to Octavius]. And his first request of me is that I should meet him secretly at Capua or somewhere near Capua. That is quite childish, if he thinks it can be done secretly."

risk she and her family were under due to her uncle's acts, demonstrates her anger by saying she would kill him if she could. Octavius replies by saying that his mother is reading the situation wrongly, that Caesar's position is much more solid than it seems. Atia scolds the son with the following words: "Think think think - that's all you do, you silly boy." Later on, while organizing a collective suicide due to the risk of Pompey's supporters invading her home, Atia asks Octavius if he has any preferences over which slave should kill him, to which he replies that it is not necessary, for he is old enough to take care of himself - the mother cheerily praises him: "oh, my brave little man." This representation of Octavius as a child, a small boy, is constantly underlined in the series and is something the young Roman will have to fight against during the following episodes. Beyond this, Atia also helps building the character to the public: the validated scene in which a mother is affectionate towards her son and sees him eternally as a baby is credible to the viewers.<sup>13</sup>

Atia's character is built in a very different way from what ancient tradition left us as the historical Atia, who, according to the ancient sources, was very devout to the gods and did not accept vulgarities in her presence (Suet. Aug. 94-4; Nic. Dam. 4; Tac. Dial. 28).<sup>14</sup> Historical Atia was married and died in the year 43 BCE. However, the characterization of the character as a controlling mother is not only poetic license for the composition of the character to build *Rome's* plot. This portrayal is present in Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus*, for example, which registers that Atia would not let him leave the house unless he was going to places he went to as a boy, even after Octavius took the toga and became an adult man by law. He was also forced to live the same lifestyle he did as a child and still had the same childhood room.

From the ninth episode of the first season on, Octavius begins imposing himself to his mother, asking to not to be called a child anymore, although he still concedes to her will. But in the second season, in the second episode, he breaks off from his mother's dominance and begins

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<sup>13</sup> According to Maingueneau (1998: 65): "Scenographies often rely on validated speech scenes that I call validated, that is to say, already installed in the collective memory, either as something that is rejected or as a valued model. Family conversation at mealtime is an example of a positive 'validated scene' in French culture. The repertoire of these scenes varies according to the group targeted by the discourse, but, in general, to any audience, however vast and heterogeneous, a stock of scenes we can consider as shared can be associated."

<sup>14</sup> Evidently this construction is in many parts due to Atia being the mother of the model emperor Augustus; her own characterization of a woman with unblemished morals helps in the composition of the *princeps'* impeccable image in the ancient sources, by association of his *ethos*.

following his own desires, overwhelmed by Antony's fake promises of giving him the inheritance Caesar had left him - although his mother advised him not to create conflict with Antony. The character tells his mother "I've decided to join the public life," and during a conflicted dialogue that follows, he physically attacks Atia, which, in the plot, symbolizes the breakup from the mother-dependent Octavius-*puer*. He only reappears in the fourth episode, already an adult.

This preoccupation with age, or better yet, with the way it was publicly manipulated does not end for Octavius when he reaches maturity. After eliminating his main political rivals and reaching Roman governance, Octavius is portrayed for the rest of his career with his young effigy, never presenting any signs of aging until his death, in 14 CE (Martins, 2011). In the same way, though for other reasons, the triumphant Octavius will never age for us, the viewers, and the depiction that remains at the end is almost a natural consequence for him, a distinguished individual from childhood who did not let his passions lead him, as happens to other characters, absorbed in their search for power. Thus, it is noticeable that the effect of verisimilitude required by the television production to give credit to the character's construction is based on a tradition that comes from the Ancient World.

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