

## CORE ISSUES

- 1 How does the film portray the struggle between traditional order and individual freedom in the personal conflict between Judah and Messala?
- 2 How does the film represent Roman imperialism? How does the film portray the nature of Rome in the figure of Messala? In the figure of Arrius?
- 3 What aspects of Judah's character are Judaeo-Christian? Are there Roman aspects to his character?
- 4 How does the film present the theme of separation, failed or broken relationships, and the obstacles to human contact?
- 5 Does the film make an overall plea for unity and tolerance?

## Chapter 4

# Spartacus (1960)

*They trained him to kill for their pleasure . . . but they trained him a little too well . . .*

Director: Stanley Kubrick  
Screenplay: Dalton Trumbo  
Howard Fast (novel)  
Produced by: Kirk Douglas for Bryna Productions  
Reconstruction and Restoration (1991): Robert A. Harris and James C. Katz  
Running Time: 196 minutes

### Cast

Spartacus	Kirk Douglas
Marcus Licinius Crassus	Laurence Olivier
Varinia	Jean Simmons
Antoninus	Tony Curtis
Lentulus Batiatus	Peter Ustinov
Senator Gracchus	Charles Laughton
Julius Caesar	John Gavin
Marcus Glabrus	John Dall
Crixus	John Ireland
Dionysus	Nick Dennis
Draba	Woody Strode
Marcellus	Charles McGraw
Tigranes	Herbert Lom

## Plot Outline

In the mines of North Africa, a Thracian slave named Spartacus is being starved to death for helping another slave. Lentulus Batiatus, an affluent Roman businessman, visits the mines to buy strong male slaves to train as gladiators: he is a *lanista*, the owner of a *ludus*, or gladiatorial school. Batiatus likes the sturdy look of Spartacus, so he and others are taken to the school in Capua, near Naples, where the men will be trained to fight. There Batiatus tells the new slaves they will be rewarded for their hard work, then turns them over to his chief trainer and overseer, Marcellus, warning him that the Thracian is rebellious, but "he has quality." During a drill, Marcellus challenges Spartacus to kill him, but Spartacus wisely restrains himself. Later in the steam bath, the other gladiator trainees warn Spartacus that Marcellus may have chosen to make him an example. Spartacus attempts conversation with Draba, another slave, but is rebuffed. In the gladiator quarters, the men are rewarded with a female servant to use for their sexual pleasure. Batiatus assigns Varinia, the most beautiful slave woman, to Spartacus. Varinia enters Spartacus' cell, and he admires her beauty, admitting he has never had a woman before. As Varinia undresses, Marcellus and Batiatus spy on them through a grate in the ceiling of the cell. Spartacus erupts in anger at the intrusion, "I am not an animal!" and refuses to perform for their amusement, so Varinia is led out of the cell. During a gladiatorial lesson, Spartacus steals a look at Varinia doing her chores, and Marcellus mocks him. Later, when the women are again assigned to the cells, Marcellus shows Varinia to Spartacus then gives her to another gladiator. In the kitchen area at mealtime, as Varinia pours water for the men, Spartacus touches her hand, and she responds to him cautiously as they exchange warm glances.

The school's routine is disrupted when the steward announces the arrival of Marcus Licinius Crassus, the richest and most powerful man in Rome, who brings with him a lady friend, Helena, and another patrician couple, Glabrus and Claudia. Batiatus welcomes the group with flattering compliments, and invites them to sit in his gallery overlooking the training yard. Varinia serves the guests, and Crassus is struck by her beauty. Crassus requests a private showing of two gladiator pairs in combat, and Lady Helena stipulates "to the death." When their host demurs, explaining the show would damage morale and be prohibitively expensive, Crassus says: "Name your price." The show is immediately arranged. A rumor goes through the gladiator quarters there is to be a fight to the death, while Spartacus and his fellow slave Crixus agree they would have to kill

each other if matched together in the arena. The men are lined up in the yard, as the two Roman ladies choose the four combatants based on their physical appearance: Crixus is set against Galino, and Draba against Spartacus.

Back in the gallery, Crassus informs his host he wants to buy Varinia at a high price, and Batiatus promises to send her to Rome tomorrow. Crassus also announces he has arranged for Glabrus, his political protégé, to be made commander of the city garrison in Rome. In the arena below, the first pair is called out: "Those who are about to die salute you." Crixus slays Galino in the contest, and the next pair is summoned. Draba fights with trident and net against Spartacus, who carries the short sword, or *gladius*. After a tough fight, Draba pins Spartacus against the fence of the enclosure, but when the ladies call out "Kill him," he refuses. Instead, Draba hurls his trident into the gallery, and climbs up to attack Crassus, but a Roman guard spears him from behind, and Crassus completes the kill by driving a dagger into the back of his neck. That evening, the slaves see the dead body of Draba hanging upside down in their quarters as a warning against rebellion. In the kitchen the next day, Spartacus discovers Varinia has been sold. When Marcellus whips him in the face to silence him, Spartacus erupts in fury, and kills the overseer by drowning him in a pot of soup. A riot breaks out, and the other slaves follow Spartacus' lead, fighting their way out of the school and running for the hills. Batiatus jumps in the wagon with Varinia and heads for Rome.

In the city, the Roman senators are in turmoil as they discuss the gladiator uprising in Capua. There are reports that slaves are on the loose around Mount Vesuvius, robbing Roman citizens and desecrating their property. Senator Gracchus, a prominent Republican, downplays the threat from a mere "slave army" and proposes they dispatch Glabrus and six cohorts of the city garrison to suppress the revolt. Under the frightened protest of another senator, "There are more slaves in Rome than Romans!" Gracchus suggests the temporary appointment of young Julius Caesar as commander of the remaining city troops for their protection. Outside on the Senate steps, Gracchus, a "man of the people" who fears Crassus' political ambition, discloses to Caesar his strategy to separate Glabrus and his soldiers from Crassus. At the villa of Crassus, the governor of Sicily has sent a group of slaves as a gift. Crassus is drawn to a young male slave, Antoninus, who tells his new master he is a "singer of songs." Crassus appoints Antoninus as his body servant. In his study, Crassus meets with Glabrus, who informs him of his senatorial charge. Crassus is enraged, recognizing the work of Gracchus, and orders Glabrus to leave the city

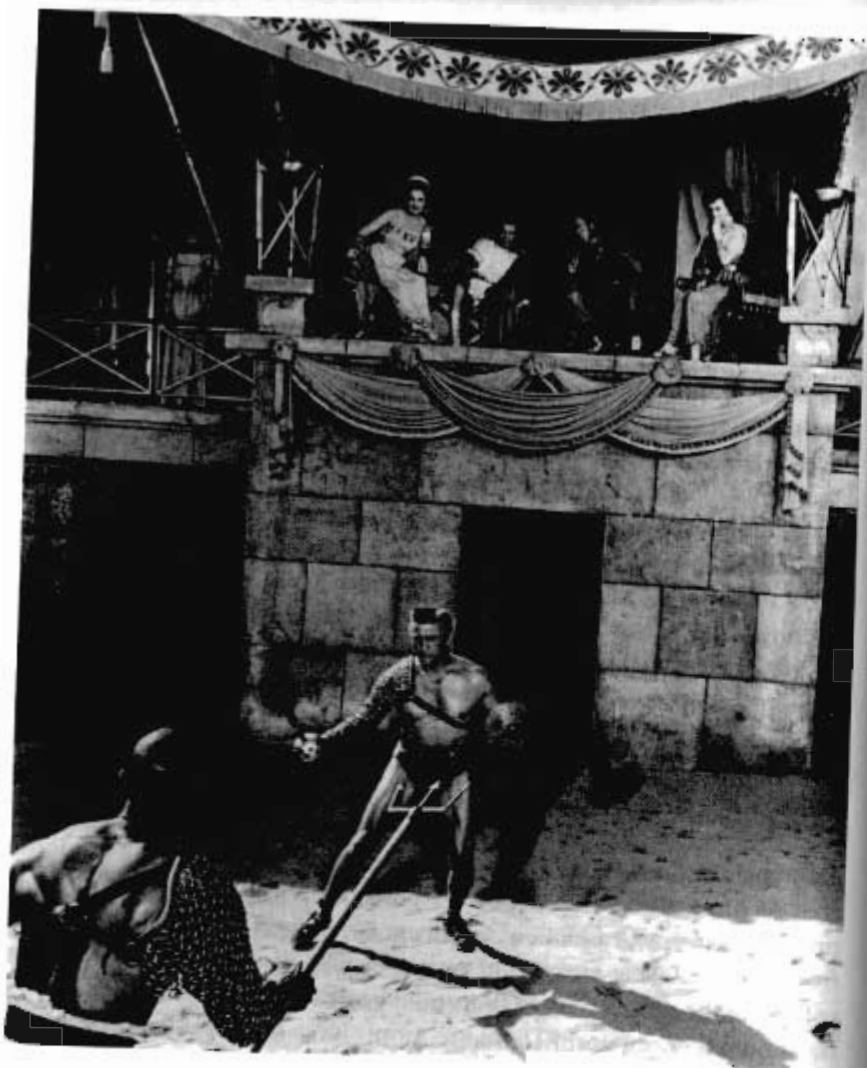


Plate 7 *Spartacus*. Draba (Woody Strode) and Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) fight in the arena at the gladiator school in Capua to entertain the Roman nobles. Courtesy of Bryna/Universal/The Kobal Collection.

quietly after nightfall and make certain he attains victory. As the fugitives sweep through southern Italy, looting villas and freeing other slaves, Spartacus becomes their leader. At the deserted school of Batiatus, the gladiators debate their next move. Spartacus proposes they raise "an army

of gladiators" to oppose the Romans. The rebels decide to fight their way south to Brundisium and escape Italy by sea on hired Cilician pirate ships; from there they can seek their homes as free people. In the countryside, Spartacus is recruiting forces from bands of runaway slaves, when he is reunited with Varinia, who easily escaped from Batiatus. Pledging their love to each other, they ride off.

At Gracchus' house, the senator dines with a disgruntled Batiatus, who complains of his ruined business and the revolt caused by Crassus' uninvited visit to the *ludus*. Gracchus agrees to help him by purchasing Varinia, "when she's caught," to annoy Crassus. That evening at the villa of Crassus, Antoninus helps his master bathe, as they watch the city garrison march off to deal with the slave army. In the mountains, Spartacus reviews his troops as they train and prepare for battle. The rebel camp includes many families, women and children, and all work together to maintain the group. More escaped slaves arrive, including Antoninus. Around the campfire, Antoninus entertains his new friends with magic tricks. Spartacus is inspired by his talent, and asks him to sing a song. As he sings of homecoming, Varinia and Spartacus share a romantic moment. The next day, Spartacus negotiates with the Cilician envoy, Tigranes, to have five hundred ships waiting at Brundisium to transport the rebels from Italy, giving him a chest full of gold as a deposit. The next day, Crixus rides back with the news the Roman army is encamped without the normal fortifications: they obviously do not take the "slave army" seriously. Spartacus proposes a surprise night attack on the unsuspecting Romans. The rebels wipe out the entire Roman force, burn their camp, seize their weapons and armor, and take Glabrus prisoner. After humiliating Glabrus, Spartacus sends him back to Rome in disgrace. In the Senate, the defeated Glabrus is forced to explain the military disaster: "They were only slaves!" The senators are outraged when he admits he did not set up the proper defenses. Gracchus shrewdly manipulates Crassus into pronouncing the sentence of punishment for his associate's negligence, so Glabrus is banished from Rome. Crassus then lays down command of his legions and announces his retirement to private life, but Gracchus knows he'll be back.

As the swelling ranks of slaves move across the Italian countryside, Spartacus works with rebel leaders to plan their movement towards the southern coast. He is overjoyed when Varinia informs him she is pregnant with his child. In Rome, the senators debate whether to let the slaves escape. On the advice of Gracchus, they decide both to confirm Caesar as permanent commander of the city garrison and send two legions to stop Spartacus. But bad news arrives: the Romans are defeated by the slave

army, losing nineteen thousand men in the battle at Metapontum. At the baths, Crassus questions Caesar about his alliance with Gracchus and accuses him of currying favor with the plebeian class. Gracchus finds them, and offers Crassus the commission to lead the Roman army against Spartacus. In exchange, Crassus demands absolute power over the Senate and the legions, which Gracchus fears will lead to dictatorship.

Meanwhile, the slaves reach the beach at Brundisium, where they joyfully make camp. In his tent, Spartacus receives Tigranes, who informs the rebel leader the promised ships are not there; when threatened, Tigranes reveals Crassus bought off the pirates. Spartacus now realizes they are trapped in the heel of Italy between two advancing Roman armies: Pompey lands at Rhegium, and Lucullus at Brundisium. The slaves are being forced to march north back to Rome to meet the army of Crassus, who wants the victory to solidify his political power. Spartacus addresses the assembled slaves, telling them they face a long march and a hard fight. In Rome, Crassus is confirmed as commander and promises to crush Spartacus. As the armies approach each other, Crassus confers with his officers in his tent. Batiatus is brought to the camp to provide a physical description of Spartacus, but the *lanista* reminds Crassus he saw the gladiator in the ring at Capua. In exchange for information, Crassus promises Batiatus the profit from the auction of all surviving slaves after their capture. That evening in the slave camp, after surveying the sleeping families, Spartacus talks with Varinia about the future, and she promises him she will live for their child.

At daybreak the armies meet in the field. With the help of Pompey's legions, Crassus crushes the slave army and takes thousands of prisoners, including Spartacus and Antoninus. When Crassus tries to identify their leader, the captives refuse to give him up, all shouting in solidarity, "I am Spartacus!" Crassus orders the crucifixion of six thousand prisoners along the Via Appia all the way back to the gates of Rome. When Batiatus protests the loss of promised income, Crassus has him flogged. Recognizing Antoninus among the captives, Crassus orders him withheld to the end, along with Spartacus. Crassus finds Varinia and her newborn lying on the hillside and sends her to his villa in the city. At the house of Gracchus in Rome, Batiatus complains of Crassus' mistreatment and wants revenge, so the senator sends him to steal Varinia. Caesar arrives to take Gracchus by force to the Senate for a secret meeting with Crassus, who threatens the senator and drives him into exile. At his villa, Crassus attempts to woo Varinia, but she remains steadfast in her love for Spartacus. That night, an enraged Crassus forces Spartacus and Antoninus to fight to the death. To

spare him from crucifixion, Spartacus kills Antoninus and holds him in his arms as he dies. Spartacus is crucified just outside the gates of Rome. Batiatus brings Varinia and her infant to Gracchus, who frees mother and child, giving the *lanista* a senatorial pass and a generous sum of money to escort them safely to Aquitania. After an affectionate farewell, Gracchus commits suicide. Their wagon passes through the city gates, and while Batiatus shows the guard their papers, Varinia approaches Spartacus, who is dying a slow death on the cross. Weeping, she shows him the child: "This is your son . . . He is free." Batiatus urges her back to the wagon, and Varinia turns around to gaze at Spartacus as they depart along the Via Appia lined with thousands of crosses.

### Ancient Background

The film *Spartacus* is set in the time of the historical slave rebellion that took place from 73 to 71 bc. The last decades of the Republic were one of the most volatile and bloody periods of Roman history. After 146 bc, when Rome finally defeated Carthage, the North African city-state that was Rome's chief rival for power in the Mediterranean world, a great influx of plundered treasure and slaves from vanquished territories began to pour into the Italian peninsula (Shaw, 3-4). The wealth coming in from military conquests went to a rather small number of elite Roman and Italian families, who used their growing assets primarily to buy great tracts of land for their *latifundia*, extensive farm or ranching properties. Thus, by the late second century bc, a large-scale agricultural economy based on cheap slave labor was rapidly developing, with the greatest concentration of agrarian slavery located in southern Italy, especially in the lush region of Campania and on the island of Sicily. "In the case of Roman Italy, slaves were imported in huge numbers into the very heart of the conquering state and transformed its basic economy" (Shaw, 8).

The slaves came from both sides of the Mediterranean and from all over Europe, comprising many different ethnic groups and speaking several different languages. Most had been enslaved in their lifetime, and so retained the memory of individual freedom, a factor that perhaps contributed to the prospect of substantial armed resistance against slave owners (Shaw, 9-13). Three great slave wars in response to major revolts took place in southern Italy in the period between 140 and 70 bc. The first two slave uprisings occurred on the island of Sicily, instigated by agricultural slaves. The first erupted in the mid-130s and ended in 132 bc, and the

second broke out in 104 and was quelled four years later in 100 BC. In both cases, the official reaction of the government in Rome was sluggish, because the idea of subduing slave rebellions was considered beneath the dignity of consuls and praetors, the high-ranking officials who commanded Roman armies against legitimate foreign foes. Only when the local police response to the uprisings in Sicily proved ineffective, and after the escaped slaves had wreaked considerable havoc throughout the countryside, did the Roman Senate intervene and send proper legions to repress the insurgents.

Political and social upheavals back in Rome exacerbated the inadequate response to the slave revolts in Sicily. In the years 133 to 121 BC, the young tribunes of the people, Tiberius Gracchus (163–133 BC) and Gaius Gracchus (158–121 BC), grandsons of the great Roman war hero Scipio Africanus (235–183 BC), each attempted a series of agrarian and economic reforms to relieve the financial distress of the middle and lower classes, many of whom were small farmers displaced by the new system of large slave-worked plantations. The reform efforts of the Gracchi were opposed by the wealthy land-owning senatorial class, and both brothers in turn were brutally assassinated, along with their supporters, in riots backed by the Senate. This episode introduced violence and bloodshed as a permanent feature of Roman domestic politics, and resulted in the polarization of the political system into two opposing factions, the *optimates* and the *populares* (Grant, 169–76).

In 107 BC, Gaius Marius (157–86 BC), a wealthy plebeian of the equestrian class, was elected consul and appointed general of the Roman forces in Africa against the will of the Senate. By ignoring the legal property qualifications for military enlistment and actively recruiting landless men, Marius radically restructured the army and won several victories with troops who were fiercely loyal to him, dependent as they were upon their general for material rewards (Grant, 177–80). By 100 BC, Marius, now a leader of the *populares*, was elected to his sixth consulship, while riots and urban instability continued to afflict the city of Rome.

In 88 BC, Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138–78 BC), a patrician leader of the *optimates*, was elected to the consulship, and the Senate granted him the command of the war in Asia Minor. Since the Assembly had already appointed Marius, Sulla seized control by infamously marching his troops into Rome, the first time a general had ever committed this defiant act. Although Marius died in 86 BC, bloody factional strife continued for the next several years. Sulla returned from the East in 82 BC and openly

invaded Italy with his legions, thereby formalizing the use of violence in Roman politics. He proclaimed himself dictator of Rome, an obsolete office outlawed in the third century BC because of the fear of autocracy (Grant, 184–9). By means of ruthless "proscriptions," Sulla published lists of names of his enemies, mainly aristocrats linked to the *populares* (including Marius' nephew, a young Julius Caesar), who were sentenced to be executed and have their property confiscated. Sulla also imposed a series of conservative laws to reinforce senatorial powers and dilute those of the tribunes, and made it illegal for a general to lead his legions anywhere near Rome. After Sulla retired and died in 78 BC, bitter political competition intensified within the aristocracy at Rome, and precedents were set for ambitious military leaders to use their armies in pursuit of personal goals.

In the mid-70s BC, two important figures emerged on the Roman political scene. Marcus Licinius Crassus (ca. 115–53 BC) and Cnaeus Pompeius Magnus (106–48 BC), known as Pompey the Great (Grant, 192–4). In 77 BC, Pompey, who was a successful general under Sulla and celebrated a military triumph at the age of 24, took command of the Roman legions in Spain to suppress a revolt of pro-Marian factions led by the renegade governor Quintus Sertorius. Crassus, the richest man in Rome, came from an old and noble plebeian family. A former partisan of Sulla, Crassus was said to have increased his wealth greatly during the dictator's proscriptions. However, after falling out of favor with the Sullan party, Crassus was in a precarious political position. Crassus worked diligently to advance his career, earning the good will and loyalty of many liberal-minded senators, until he was elected praetor in 73 BC. That same year, the third and last great slave rebellion broke out, this time not in Sicily but on the Italian mainland, and led not by farm slaves but by a professional gladiator named Spartacus (Shaw, 24–9, 130–65). While several ancient sources mention the Spartacus slave war, the most complete literary accounts were written well after the events occurred and by aristocratic authors whose elite perspectives could hardly be considered sympathetic to the rebels' aims, about which there is little comment. According to the Greek biographer Plutarch (ca. AD 40s–120s), Spartacus was a freeborn Thracian, a man of "great spirit and bodily strength," who was sold into slavery and trained as a gladiator at the school of Lentulus Batiatus in Capua (*Life of Crassus* 8, in Shaw, 131). Capua was a posh city in the wealthy southern region of Campania, where prominent gladiatorial training barracks fed the growing taste for armed entertainment among the Roman people.

At this time, gladiatorial combat was becoming increasingly popular at Rome because of its close association with the ideology of Roman power, as ambitious politicians sought to manipulate spectacles in the arena to demonstrate their political and military authority to the Roman masses (Futrell, 1997, 29–33). The gladiators themselves were mostly slaves, captured in Rome's many foreign conquests, and thus maintained the very lowest social status, yet an aura of fascination and dangerous allure attended these muscular experts who killed on demand (Barton, 11–46). Many ancient sources reflect this curious "gladiator contradiction" by including in their narratives positive, even extraordinary details about Spartacus' personality, aptitude, and experience: "Spartacus is characterized as a very impressive figure, not at all 'slave-like' or un-Roman in his appearance or priorities" (Futrell, 2001, 81). To account for the gladiator's many military successes over Roman troops, for example, the Greek historian Appian (ca. AD 90s–160s) states Spartacus served as a soldier in the Roman auxiliaries, and his defection from the army led to his arrest and imprisonment (*Civil Wars* 1.14.116, in Shaw, 140). Still, the ancient sources are careful to convey the terrible outrage of the slave uprising, and to emphasize the lethal force of its leader, Spartacus, whether with open hostility or with grudging respect. For two years, the Italian peninsula was rocked by the revolt, and the war that finally subdued the rebel slaves involved the two leading Roman military commanders of the day, Crassus and Pompey.

In 73 BC, Spartacus escaped from the school of Batiatus with about seventy or eighty gladiators, seizing knives and weapons along the way (Bradley, 1989, 136–9). His chief lieutenants were two gladiators from Gaul, Crixus and Oenomaus. They camped nearby on Mount Vesuvius, and soon were joined by hundreds of fugitives, mostly agricultural slaves from the surrounding area. Although Spartacus may have tried to restrain them, the escaped slaves plundered and pillaged many rich *latifundia*, capturing considerable amounts of booty. With Rome's best soldiers busy in Spain and Asia Minor, the Senate voted to send the praetor Claudius Glaber to subdue the insurgency in Campania with a small force of locally recruited militia organized into six cohorts, about three thousand men. When Glaber thought he had the rebels pinned on Vesuvius, in a fatal Roman underestimation of the slaves' strategic abilities, Spartacus and his men climbed down the other side and attacked the Roman troops from the rear. Next Spartacus successfully commanded his men against two legionary cohorts led by the praetor Publius Varinius. At this point, Spartacus began to push north, while Crixus separated from Spartacus to

lead his own group. By 72 BC, the rebel force had grown to about seventy thousand slaves, and the Senate finally began to get serious.

Two consuls, Lucius Gellius Publicola and Cnaeus Cornelius Lentulus, each commanding two legions (about eleven thousand men), marched against the slaves in central Italy, but Spartacus defeated the consular armies. The propraetor Quintus Arrius won a victory over Crixus' troops, and Crixus was killed. After Spartacus fought and defeated Arrius, he kept moving north, where he defeated the proconsul of Cisalpine Gaul, Gaius Cassius Longinus, and later another praetor, Cnaeus Manlius (Livy, *Summaries* 95–7, in Shaw, 149–50). Some sources suggest that Spartacus wanted to lead the slaves across the Alps to escape to their homelands, but instead Spartacus decided to return to southern Italy, perhaps to head for Sicily by sea. By the end of the year, Spartacus had defeated the armies of several high-ranking Roman generals, and his rebel band had swelled to about 120,000 people.

The Senate, now truly alarmed, voted to bypass the consuls and grant Crassus overall command of the war against Spartacus, assigning him six new legions along with the remnants of the four consular legions Spartacus had beaten. That winter, Crassus used his well-trained forces, about forty thousand men, to trap Spartacus in the toe of Italy, where the rebels may have been trying to secure ships from Cilician pirates, but without success. Meanwhile, Pompey headed back from Spain with his legions; another Roman general, Marcus Licinius Lucullus, returned from Asia Minor and landed in Brundisium, blocking any chance of an eastern escape route. In the spring of 71 BC, Spartacus fought his way from Bruttium and started north. After a few clashes, Spartacus finally met the legions of Crassus in a major battle in Lucania in the ankle region of Italy, where the slave army was crushed. Spartacus was killed, fighting bravely at the last (Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 11, in Shaw, 136), but his body was never identified amid the gruesome slaughter. Appian reports Crassus had six thousand prisoners crucified along the Via Appia from Capua all the way to Rome (*Civil Wars* 1.14.121, in Shaw, 144). About five thousand slaves escaped, but they were seized just north of Rome by Pompey's army as they were marching home, thereby allowing Pompey to claim credit for ending the war and overshadow the glory of Crassus. After the slave revolt was subdued, the victors put aside their rivalry to form a political alliance. The following year, with their legions still encamped at the gates of Rome, Pompey and Crassus demanded election as consuls for 70 BC. While Crassus was eligible as an ex-praetor, Pompey was not legally qualified because he was too young and lacked the requisite experience in prior office, yet the

Senate had no choice but to yield. The consuls dedicated their year in office to demolishing the unpopular constitution of Sulla and restoring the power of the tribunes.

For the next decade, Roman armies engaged in small-scale skirmishes with bands of fugitive slaves throughout southern Italy, but the revolt led by Spartacus was the last great slave war in Roman antiquity. However, Spartacus was almost certainly not a revolutionary in the contemporary sense of the word. In examining the ancient sources, modern historians agree Spartacus was not formally committed to the abolition of slavery, nor did he plan the total overhaul of the Roman social system. If he had a strategy at all, he "probably had as his limited design the restoration of the largely foreign slaves back to their respective homelands" (Wyke, 35). It remains a provocative fact that Spartacus merits only the briefest of mentions in the standard Roman histories of the next several hundred years, until his image as a champion of the oppressed is reappropriated, some would say exploited, by the very class of people against whom he rebelled.

### Background to the Film

Stanley Kubrick's film *Spartacus* is based on the 1951 novel of the same name by American author Howard Fast (1914–2003). But two hundred years before the publication of Fast's novel, European and American writers began to revive the figure of Spartacus and the story of the great slave uprising as a social, political, and moral symbol for contemporary concerns and issues (Wyke, 34–60; Futrell, 2001, 83–8). Starting in the mid-eighteenth century, and fueled by the bloody political revolutions in both the United States (1776) and France (1789), the image of Spartacus, romanticized for an era of new revolutionary ideals, became associated with the natural human right to freedom, while his struggle against oppression was used as a validation for radical and even armed resistance to unjust tyranny. "From this period, representations of the ancient slave rebellion and the gladiator Spartacus were profoundly driven by the political concerns of the present" (Wyke, 36). In Paris in 1760, Bernard-Joseph Saurin staged his tragic drama *Spartacus*, an immensely popular play that adapted the historical account to suit current ideologies of individual liberty and righteous revolt, while also portraying the tensions between the hero's private life and his political aims.

The figure of Spartacus also influenced anti-slavery debates of the period and the increasingly charged discourses of emancipation in both

Europe and the Americas. In 1791 in the French colony of Saint Domingue, a large-scale slave uprising led by former slave Toussaint l'Ouverture launched a thirteen-year revolution that invited contemporary comparisons to Spartacus and the ancient slave war. Thousands of slaves escaped from wealthy plantations and organized into armies, and after defeating the Napoleonic forces they established the nation of Haiti in 1804, the first independent nation in Latin America.

The projection of Spartacus as an image of national independence, rather than individual liberty, became more prevalent in the nineteenth century, as the newly sovereign nation-states began to affirm and promote their identities. Such nationalism informs Robert Montgomery Bird's 1831 patriotic play, *The Gladiator*, the most successful stage production of the nineteenth-century American theater; in this spirited melodrama, Spartacus and the rebel slaves represent the American colonists fighting to protect the political and cultural independence of their homeland from the British imperialist threat. During the *risorgimento* movement that led to the birth of a unified Italy in 1861, Spartacus was also employed as a symbol of revolutionary ideology to articulate Italian nationalistic struggles, as he became a virtual stand-in for Giuseppe Garibaldi, the military hero and leader of the unification (Bondanella, 158–65). In 1874, Raffaello Giovagnoli published his *Spartaco*, a hugely popular and sweeping epic novel that configured Spartacus as the victorious creator of a unified Italian state. Giovagnoli's novel would also be the source of the first cinematic adaptations of the Spartacus story by early twentieth-century Italian filmmakers, who were eager to produce films on ancient Roman themes to boost the new state's prestige and support its nationalistic agenda.

In the late 1800s, the image of Spartacus experienced a new incarnation when it became linked with the growing workers' movement, and soon the ancient slave revolt was integrated into Marxist ideology as an archetype of active resistance to capitalist domination (Futrell, 2001, 88–90). By the early twentieth century, admiration for the gladiator as a hero of the proletariat struggling against economic exploitation and social inequality was universally expressed in the writings of German Socialists, Soviet historians, Italian Communists, and American labor leaders and union activists. "Spartacus came to be read as acutely relevant to the consolidation of the modern class struggle" (Wyke, 48). During the McCarthy hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Americans persecuted by the government "witch hunt" also looked to the figure of Spartacus as a symbol of justified defiance to repressive authority. In 1947, writer Howard Fast was an enormously prolific and best-selling novelist, as well as an active member of

the Communist Party of the United States (he resigned in 1957), when he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (Wyke, 60–3; Futrell, 2001, 90–7). Declining to surrender the names of members of a Spanish leftist organization, Fast was convicted of contempt and incarcerated in 1950. According to the author's introduction to the new edition, he began to conceive the novel *Spartacus* while in prison, as a reflection of his present political ordeal: "The country was as close to a police state as it had ever been. J. Edgar Hoover, the chief of the FBI, took on the role of a petty dictator. The fear of Hoover and his file on thousands of liberals permeated the country. No one dared to vote and speak against our imprisonment. As I said, it was not the worst time to write a book like *Spartacus*" ("Spartacus and the Blacklist," vii–viii).

Upon his release from jail, Fast found himself "blacklisted" when several mainstream publishers refused to print his new novel. So *Spartacus* was self-published in 1951, at the height of the Red Scare, when hundreds of writers and artists were banned from employment, especially in Hollywood. At a time when an anxious American entertainment industry made every effort in its productions to strike the triumphant chords of American military power and anti-Communism, as one scholar observes, Fast instead "attempted to popularize a Marxist hero of the class struggle" by inviting readers to identify with the heroic social and political activism of Spartacus (Wyke, 61). In Fast's imagination, the gladiator-slave Spartacus is depicted as a human commodity desired and consumed by the pleasure-hungry Romans, who purchase his life and death with their tainted capitalist wealth; but freed from the bondage economy of Rome, the rebel leader Spartacus becomes the father of a new community of ex-slaves based on an ideology of shared labor and the family as "an ethical paradigm" (Futrell, 2001, 96). The novel *Spartacus* was an immediate popular sensation, one of the most financially successful self-published novels of the century, and the massive 1960 reprint to coincide with the release of the Kubrick film defied the blacklist and restored Fast to commercial publishing venues.

In the politically cautious atmosphere of Hollywood in the early 1950s, a young photographer named Stanley Kubrick (1928–99) began directing films, and within a few years became one of the industry's most original, versatile, and controversial artists. After making a few films early in the decade, Kubrick's first important work was *The Killing* (1956), a critically acclaimed film noir. His next film was the powerful, anti-war *Paths of Glory* (1957), starring Kirk Douglas, who was so impressed by Kubrick's work that he asked him to replace Anthony Mann as the director of his

epic film, *Spartacus*. After leaving Hollywood to take up permanent residence in London, Kubrick directed the screen version of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1962), followed by the hugely successful satire about nuclear war, *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Kubrick's next film was the science fiction cult classic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which won him an Oscar for Visual Effects. Perhaps his most controversial film was the brilliant yet brutally violent and visually bleak *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). In his later career, the notoriously perfectionist and increasingly reclusive director made fewer films at greater intervals: *Barry Lyndon* (1975), *The Shining* (1980), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). His final project, *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001), was completed by director Steven Spielberg. Nominated four times for the Best Director Oscar, Kubrick is remembered for the unique brilliance as well as the polarizing effect of his cinematic vision.

### Making the Movie

The film *Spartacus* emerges mainly from the creative drive of actor Kirk Douglas, who as executive producer made the film through his own company, Bryna Productions, under the aegis of Universal Pictures, at a cost of \$12 million. After reading Fast's novel in 1957, Douglas was inspired by the story of the rebel slave leader and wanted to make an epic film that articulated the eternal human fight for freedom against oppression. Even with the recent success of films like *Ben-Hur* (1959), big-budget epic spectacles still had to attract massive audiences to be profitable, so the idea of adapting Fast's leftist parable generated both political and commercial perils for producers of a Hollywood movie (Wyke, 63–72; Futrell, 2001, 91–111). But Douglas decided to ignore, or perhaps inflame, those risks by hiring writer Dalton Trumbo to adapt the novel for the screen. Trumbo, one of the infamous "Hollywood Ten" who refused to "name names," was imprisoned and blacklisted after the first round of McCarthy hearings in 1947, and from then on was forced to work on film scripts in anonymity. His screenplay for *Roman Holiday* (1953) won an Oscar for his "front man," Ian McLellan Hunter, but was posthumously credited to Trumbo in 1992; he won another Best Screenplay Oscar for *The Brave One* (1956) under the pseudonym "Robert Rich," exposing the absurdity of the so-called "Red Ban" to an increasingly fed-up industry. With the credits for *Spartacus*, the names of Trumbo and Fast were publicly acknowledged for



the first time in thirteen years. Trumbo's literate, luminous screenplay is marked by incantatory dialogue, where characters often repeat brief lines three or four times for an almost magical, spellbinding effect.

As director, Universal chose Anthony Mann, who would go on to direct *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), but after he worked on the scenes of Spartacus' bondage in the mines, Douglas replaced him with the young Kubrick. While Douglas' conception of the story controls much of the film, in the stark simplicity of the sets and the meticulous realism of the large-scale battle sequences, *Spartacus* clearly displays the intense style of Kubrick's developing visual artistry. Kubrick insisted on shooting certain scenes with little or no dialogue, to underscore the visual power of the cinematic medium and enhance its "mythic effect," as in the almost wordless first meeting between Spartacus and Varinia in his gladiator cell (Elley, 110). Composer Alex North provided an unusual and innovative score for the film, where the influence of epic master Miklós Rózsa can be detected only in the martial passages, with their heavy brass fanfare and marching drums (Solomon, 2001b, 330-1). Yet the music soon turns dissonant and dark, giving the film an aggressive sound; even in the intimate scenes, the muted woodwind melodies suggest frustrated yearning and a sense of impending loss. But when the rebel army is depicted on horseback or in camp, the rising strains of North's music evoke Aaron Copland's folkloric scores in the Western movie genre, reinforcing Douglas' narrative concept of destiny on the move.

*Spartacus* was mostly filmed in the hills of California, a less costly look-alike for the golden countryside of southern Italy, while the bleached sands of Death Valley stand in for the North African mines. The scenes at the Roman villa of Crassus take place at Hearst Castle in San Simeon, which the audience recognizes when Crassus strides by the opulent marble colonnade of the famous outdoor Neptune Pool. The climactic final battle scene, shot in Spain in a breathtaking wide-screen format with thousands of extras, is the most realistic depiction of an ancient battle sequence anywhere on film (Solomon, 2001a, 53-5). Taking the view behind the ragtag slave army, the camera puts on deadly display the famous geometric organization of the well-trained Roman legions.

From the start, *Spartacus* attempts to differentiate itself from previous epic films, by setting up an ostensibly secular conflict between the cruel Roman practice of slavery and the universal human passion for freedom (Elley, 109-12; Solomon, 2001a, 50-6). The opening titles assign stark images to each of the main characters: a clenched fist for Spartacus, an eagle for Crassus, a jar for Varinia, an open hand for Antoninus. At the

end of the sequence, as the director's name is flashed on the screen, the face of a classical statue cracks and falls apart, with only one eye left staring at the audience, suggesting the instability of film as a medium of truth. Instead of the impressive opening shots of marching Roman legions typical from earlier epics, the first frame of *Spartacus* reveals a lone Roman soldier enforcing discipline at the slave camp in Libya, as one scholar observes: "Rome's presence in the world is thus reduced to its basic impact: containment through force" (Futrell, 2001, 99). The opening voice-over, written and appended during the studio's contentious re-editing after the film was shot, introduces an unexpected note of Christian ideology, perhaps in anticipation of the religious imagery at the end of the film (Cooper, 1996b; Wyke, 71). While stooped slaves are shown hacking rocks out of the hillside, a vibrant male voice establishes the polarity between liberty and subjugation, and casts Spartacus as a resolute symbol of the eternal fight for personal and political autonomy:

In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity, which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome and bring about a new society, the Roman Republic stood at the very center of the civilized world. "Of all things fairest," sang the poet, "first among cities and home of the gods is golden Rome." Yet even at the zenith of her pride and power, the Republic lay fatally stricken with a disease called human slavery. The age of the dictator was at hand, waiting in shadows for the event to bring it forth. In that same century, in the conquered Greek province of Thrace, an illiterate slave woman added to her master's wealth by giving birth to a son whom she named Spartacus. A proud, rebellious son, who was sold to living death in the mines of Libya before his thirteenth birthday. There under whip and chain and sun, he lived out his youth and young manhood, dreaming the death of slavery two thousand years before it finally would die.

In the starring role, Kirk Douglas is forceful yet sympathetic, playing Spartacus with a powerful and authentic physical presence, while baring the hero's strong passions on his chiseled face with its famously cleft chin. One of Hollywood's most resourceful and accomplished leading men, the steely-voiced actor had recently played the title role in *Ulysses* (1955), Vincent van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1956), for which he was Oscar nominated, and a war-weary colonel in Kubrick's pacifist *Paths of Glory*. Scholars note how Douglas envisioned the character of Spartacus as a Moses-like figure, a patriarch leading his people to a Promised Land he will never see (Elley, 110-11; Wyke, 69). Yet in music and imagery, the film also equates

the slave movement with the migration of people seeking a better life in the American West; as the rebel leader, Douglas is almost always on horseback, riding into smoky orange sunsets through the golden California hills, where many Western movies were shot (Futrell, 2001, 106).

Many scenes in the film emphasize Spartacus as the benevolent father-leader, who generously provides for his people and collaborates with them on strategy. More of a family than an army, the camera highlights the many children within the rebel group, denoting the future of their movement; conversely, there are no Roman children, and few familial bonds, shown in the film. Although Roman authority suppresses any attempt at community among the gladiators in the *ludus*, Spartacus succeeds in creating a new family among the freed slaves, implying liberty is a compulsory element of equality and brotherhood. Trumbo's dialogue underscores the connection between the slave family and the ideal of true liberty, as Spartacus declares to the assembled crowd on their fateful march: "I do know that we're brothers, and I do know that we're free." In the gladiatorial school, the notion of a slave community is constrained by the competitive realities of the Roman arena business: the men are taught to fight, but they don't kill each other at the *ludus*, in order to preserve morale as well as Batiatus' profit margin. A sense of comradeship, or at least shared suffering, gradually begins to form among some of the gladiators, who warn Spartacus he is being singled out by Marcellus as an example. But the scene where the gladiator Draba rebuffs Spartacus' overture of friendship indicates that such bonds cannot exist within the Roman context: "Gladiators don't make friends. If we're ever matched in the ring together, I'll have to kill you." Draba's meaning is clear: communal relations among the slaves threaten the survival of the individual.

Repressed by the Roman system of bondage, the gladiator brotherhood is born in a violent act of defiance when they are ordered to perform a deadly spectacle for visiting Roman aristocrats. The film depicts the silence and solemnity of the gladiators as they prepare for the combat, in stark contrast to the self-absorbed chatter of the Romans, who are consumed by their desire for power and pleasure as they gossip about urban politics and sexual escapades. The Romans have no consideration for the gladiators, whose worthless lives they demand for their amusement, and who become in the film's imagery and dialogue nothing more than animals. In the scene where the bored, pampered Roman ladies select their champions from the inventory of Batiatus, they peer through the fence of the training yard as if at a stockyard or zoo; the camera significantly takes the perspective of the caged gladiators, framing the shot as the women

ogle them through vertical bars. The *lanista*, Batiatus, calls the gladiator a "stallion," and Lady Helena promises to punish defiant gladiators by having their throats slit "like chickens," while Spartacus famously protests from his cell: "I am not an animal!" Later, when the escaped slaves force two fat patrician captives to fight in the school's arena, Spartacus wryly notes the reversal: "Noble Romans, fighting each other like animals."

The narrative of the *ludus* offers a sharp critique of the way Roman culture debases the idea of human dignity and denies the sanctity of life (Elley, 112). Kubrick emphasizes this point in the contest of the two gladiator pairs, creating a visible hierarchy of power between the lowly slaves fighting to the death in the sandy pit, and the upper-class Romans watching the bloody entertainment from a loggia high above. As the vertical axis of the set accentuates Roman superiority and aloofness, the camera again takes the view of the gladiators waiting their turn in the staging shack; flashes of combat appear through the wooden slats, while the grunts and groans of their fellow gladiators struggling in the arena mingle with the tinkling laughter of the Roman ladies. When the door slides open, the confined slaves see a body being dragged away. The hierarchy is violated on both the narrative and visual levels when Draba disobeys the command to kill Spartacus in the ring, and instead hurls his trident upwards into the gallery. The trident penetrates the space between the two aristocrats, Crassus and Glabrus, effectively sundering the power of Roman male authority; as it flies into the frame towards the viewer, the camera seems to accuse the movie audience of siding with jaded Roman spectatorship (Wyke, 70; Fitzgerald, 28). Draba is killed as he climbs into the loggia, grasping Crassus' gilded white boot, his dark blood spurting all over the Roman's face.

After this scene, the film fuels the simmering tensions at the *ludus*, with quick cuts between the dark cells of the anxious slaves, and the ominous sound of footsteps of guards patrolling the corridors. Motivated by Draba's death and the hideous display of his inverted corpse, the rebellion finally breaks out in earnest. That Draba remains an icon of the slave brotherhood is stressed when the rebels debate what to do with their newfound freedom. Crixus is driven by revenge against the Roman oppressors: "I want to see their blood . . . right over here where Draba died." But Spartacus applies the same motivation to a different purpose: "I promised myself I'd die before I'd watch two men fight to the death again. Draba made that promise too. He kept it . . . so will I." This exchange anticipates another forced combat at the end of the film between Spartacus and his beloved friend, Antoninus.

From this point, the film divides its "dual epic focus" between the rebel slave movement led by Spartacus, and the Roman general sent to destroy him, Marcus Licinius Crassus (Elley, 110). Internationally acclaimed English actor Sir Laurence Olivier gives a brooding and formidable portrayal of Crassus' blatant ambition for power and his fixation on Spartacus. Olivier, often called the greatest actor of the century, honed his impeccable craft on the Shakespearean stage, and soon achieved numerous triumphs in prestigious films. In a career spanning six decades, he was nominated ten times for acting Oscars, and twice for directing his own performances. After taking on the romantic lead as Heathcliff in William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), Olivier played the title roles in *Henry V* (1945) and *Richard III* (1955), both of which he also directed. Perhaps Olivier's most outstanding cinematic success came when he directed and starred in a virtuoso adaptation of *Hamlet* (1948), winning four Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Olivier. His Crassus emerges as the film's most complex and mesmerizing figure, personifying the historical conflict between traditional Republican values and the ruthless tactics of the imminent "age of the dictator."

The script reflects the tension between aristocratic duty and entitlement evident within the character of Crassus: "One of the disadvantages of being a patrician," he tells Glabrus, "is that occasionally you're obliged to act like one." Meticulously attired in white clothes gleaming with gold and purple accents, Crassus wears a heavy silver necklace of two knots reminiscent of a Celtic torque, indicating both his wealth and his military experience on Rome's frontiers. Writer Trumbo also wanted the character's lines to convey the way Crassus defines himself in terms of a deep and zealous belief in Rome, such as: "Rome is an eternal thought in the mind of God" (Cooper, 1996b). Crassus' lust for power is associated with his desire to possess Rome as a feminine entity, and the dialogue emphasizes this gendered depiction by the use of feminine nouns and pronouns, as when Gracchus refers to Rome as a "rich old widow" whom Crassus wants to marry. Crassus refuses to follow the abhorrent example of Sulla by marching his troops forcefully into the city; rather he decides to wait until custody is freely offered: "One day I shall cleanse this Rome which my fathers bequeathed me. I shall restore all the traditions that made her great . . . I shall *not* bring my legions within these walls. I shall *not* violate Rome at the moment of possessing her." After the infamous bath scene, as he watches the city garrison march off in the moonlight, Crassus justifies his practice of deference: "There's only one way to deal with Rome, Antoninus. You must serve her. You must abase yourself before her. You must grovel

at her feet. You must love her." Since Crassus believes he will win control over Rome if he crushes the slave revolt, he begins to obsess over Spartacus: the conquest of the rebel leader becomes equated with his ability to dominate Rome.

Crassus' compulsive drive to capture Spartacus is exacerbated by his feelings for Varinia, the rebel leader's wife. Crassus is first attracted by Varinia's graceful appearance at the *ludus*, and later when he discovers her link to Spartacus, an intricate triangle of thwarted desire and ambition is created. The film articulates the essential opposition between the two male protagonists, and stresses the different physical qualities of Olivier and Douglas, through the eyes of Varinia. After she is seized and taken to his villa, Crassus, infatuated and unusually docile, attempts to court Varinia with gifts and kindnesses; his desire that she willingly offer herself to him parallels his desire to be invited to possess the feminine Rome. Yet he also covets Varinia as a way to conquer, contain, and finally obliterate Spartacus. When Varinia rejects Crassus, expressing her unwavering love and loyalty for her absent husband, he sees her refusal of him as a sign of his impotence in obtaining Rome, and the frustrated Crassus starts to disintegrate.

As the film presses towards the climactic meeting between the two men, the narrative reveals another complicated sexual overtone in Crassus' relationship with Antoninus, a slave from his household who escapes to follow Spartacus (Winkler, 2001c, 52). Crassus tries to seduce Antoninus in the bath scene by pointing out the martial power of the Roman legions: "There, boy, is Rome . . . the might, the majesty, the terror of Rome. No man can withstand Rome. No nation can withstand her. How much less . . . a boy?" The film explicitly links the acquisitive sexuality of Crassus with Roman patrician privilege and military aggression: "What Rome is in public, Crassus is in private" (Futrell, 2001, 106). So at the end of the film when Crassus discovers Antoninus among the fugitive slaves with Spartacus, the bitterness of a spurned suitor soon turns into murderous rage: "Crassus has thus been doubly emasculated by Spartacus – rejected by both Varinia and Antoninus for a slave-leader" (Elley, 111). Crassus' unrequited sexual attention is set against the deep mutual love they share with Spartacus, implying by contrast the Roman's physical and emotional inadequacy. Before the final battle, Crassus declares his intention, obsessively repeating the name of his adversary: "I'm not after glory . . . I'm after Spartacus. However, this campaign is not alone to kill Spartacus. It is to kill the legend of Spartacus." For Crassus, the inaccessible Varinia and the remote Antoninus represent the unattainable myth of Spartacus, and thus the unattainability of Rome.

At the heart of the new slave family is Spartacus' beloved Varinia, the fictitious character from the novel, played by incandescent British actress Jean Simmons, who starred as Ophelia in Olivier's celebrated *Hamlet*, for which she earned an Oscar nomination, and as Diana in *The Robe* (1953). When Varinia's refined bearing piques the interest of Crassus, she describes herself to him as a slave from Britannia, educated for her first master's children. At the *ludus*, Varinia has special status as a household slave in whom Batiatus has invested a great deal of money; even so, Batiatus sends her to service the gladiators sexually, though she is reserved as a prize allotment because of her beauty and quality. Thus when Varinia first meets Spartacus in his cell, her sexuality is associated with her slave duties, and though she is intrigued by his gentleness, she sullenly reminds him she is not an animal either. In the epic film context, she is "unconventionally experienced in sexual matters and equal to the hero in her desire for liberty" (Wyke, 70). In their reunion scene after the escape from Capua, Varinia and Spartacus joyously assert their freedom from slavery: "Nobody can make you stay with anybody," they repeat after each other. Yet her declaration of love for him reveals another hierarchy between them and elicits a new form of bondage. "Forbid me ever to leave you," she commands him, and he obeys: "I do forbid you." As the "wife" of Spartacus, she yields to him and willingly reserves her sexual expression solely for him, thereby maintaining the traditional structure of gender relations (Futrell, 2001, 103-4). Yet Varinia remains above Spartacus in terms of her intelligence and experience, so when Spartacus laments his ignorance about the world, it is Varinia who shares her knowledge with him.

Varinia's sexuality continues to be a dynamic part of her characterization throughout the film, and located as part of the natural world, as in the scene in the forest pool where she actively entices her husband with a display of rounded breasts in the transparent water. Before an intense kiss, Spartacus draws a fern leaf suggestively through Varinia's mouth. In their scenes together, Varinia wears dresses in skin-tone shades of rosy beige and apricot, highlighting her nude flesh as a "natural" woman. Just as Spartacus is the father of the rebel movement, Varinia is their symbolic mother; as a child grows in Varinia's womb, the swelling ranks of the slave family continue to expand (Futrell, 2001, 107). Later in the film, as she lies on the battlefield and is discovered by Crassus, with her sunken eyes and bedraggled hair revealing a touch of un-epic visual realism, Varinia's rust-red cloak signals her wounded state, indicating both the blood of her new maternity and the violent loss of Spartacus. Seized by Crassus and taken to the unnatural milieu of his Roman villa, Varinia expresses her power over

him by refusing to surrender herself, as her marble-white dress and polished jewels reflect her stone-faced strength. By coolly instructing him he can take her by force, Varinia inverts the master-slave hierarchy, while Crassus melts into a soggy pile of impotent desire. As Batiatus later comments: "The more chains you put on her, the less like a slave she looks." Within the interplay of power and yielding in Varinia's character, the film underlines her contribution to the rebellion in her opposition to Crassus, and by extension, to Rome.

Another emblem of resistance to Roman oppression is Antoninus, a character invented for the film, played by native New York actor Tony Curtis. Curtis had recently earned an Oscar nomination playing an escaped convict chained to Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and practiced his well-known comic timing in the cross-dressing farce *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Antoninus is an educated young Greek, a "singer of songs," sent as a gift to Crassus from the governor of Sicily. Captivated by his dark good looks, Crassus appoints him his body servant to facilitate greater intimacy. After he rejects Crassus and runs away to join the rebel slaves, Antoninus instead grows close to Spartacus, even becoming his "eyes" by reading documents for the illiterate leader. As a surrogate son to Spartacus, Antoninus represents the filial bond of all the slaves to their father-leader. In the scene where Antoninus entertains the slave family around the campfire, his magic trick of freeing birds from eggs is full of meaning for the fugitive slaves, as is his nostalgic song: "Through blue shadow and purple woods, I turn home." As he recites the song, the film depicts images of happy family life in the rebel camp, including a child's first steps, suggesting that wherever they are in the vast expanse of countryside, they are "home." Antoninus gives voice to the rebels' desire for freedom and peace, and thus becomes another symbol of Spartacus' larger vision, and another glaring loss for Crassus.

By contrasting Crassus' sexual interest and Spartacus' paternal love for Antoninus, the character aggravates the conflict between the two protagonists. The film proves the family bond between Antoninus and Spartacus at the end when Crassus forces them to fight to the death: "We will test this myth of slave brotherhood." Spartacus wishes to spare the young poet from suffering the slow, painful death of crucifixion, so he orders Antoninus to let him strike a quick, fatal blow. But Antoninus, just as he claimed earlier in the rebel camp, wants to fight to save his beloved Spartacus. Their mutual love excludes the Roman, yet their crossed purposes compel them to give Crassus the spectacle he commands: "The better the two friends fight the more their brotherhood is confirmed" (Fitzgerald, 43). As

Antoninus dies in the arms of Spartacus, he whispers: "I love you, Spartacus, as I love my own father." Spartacus weeps and replies: "I love you, like my son that I'll never see . . . go to sleep." The heightened emotional intensity of this combat scene recalls the death of Draba in the earlier forced battle, the event that sparked the birth of the rebel movement, and suggests Antoninus' death will ensure its continuation: "He'll come back," promises Spartacus, "and he'll be millions." Even with its extreme violence and sadness, this scene justifies the profound victory of the rebel slaves in forging the bonds of family and community outside the cruel Roman system.

Although *Spartacus* trains its moral and emotional lens on the story of the slaves, the film follows the narrative strategies of other epics in letting the Roman characters provide the most provocative political commentary in the most glamorous settings. The historical figure of the Roman *lanista*, Batiatus, is played by Peter Ustinov, who rewrote many of the character's lines and later won an Oscar for this supporting performance; Ustinov had also been nominated for his role as Nero in *Quo Vadis* (1951). Batiatus serves a remarkable function in the film as an unwitting protector of Spartacus and his legacy. At the beginning he saves Spartacus from the mines, thereby setting the plot in motion, then at the end he rescues Varinia and her infant son from persecution in Rome. In this, he is aided by Senator Gracchus, for whom "hatred of the patrician class is a profession," as Crassus charges. In one of his last roles, Gracchus is played by portly English actor Charles Laughton, who also starred as Nero in an earlier film, *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), and won an Oscar for his lead role in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). An undeniable cinematic thrill attends the scenes between these two droll British actors, who both played brilliant, sulky Neros in earlier epics.

On the Roman political spectrum, Gracchus, like Senator Gallio in *The Robe*, represents the old Republican ways struggling against the tyrannical goals of ruthless men like Crassus. His character's name is a reference to the historical Gracchi brothers, Roman reformers of the previous century who responded to the plight of the lower classes, even as the film portrays the cynical Gracchus playing to the mob as his political base. Gracchus is also depicted as a self-indulgent lover of women. In the scene where he shares a meal with his new friend, Batiatus, he professes to respect the integrity of womanhood and the dignity of Roman marriage too much to engage in the ritual, since his innate promiscuity will prevent him from honoring any bond: "I am the most virtuous man in Rome!" he deduces. When Batiatus observes the number of smiling female slaves in Gracchus' household, he remarks: "It must be tantalizing to be surrounded by so

much . . . purity." The film shows Gracchus using clever arguments to subvert traditional Roman morality, but his humor and humanity invite the audience to sympathize, even identify, with him: "Corpulence makes a man reasonable, pleasant and phlegmatic," he tells the similarly endowed Batiatus. Gracchus embodies a hedonistic but appealing Rome that attracts and gratifies the viewer, compared to the surly political extremism of Crassus, whose ideas and actions approach the fanatic (Fitzgerald, 29–30). Though all the Roman characters are greedy and ambitious, *Spartacus* exploits the epic cinematic trope of offering shifting ideas of Rome for the audience both to endorse and condemn.

At the end of the film, the scenes between Spartacus and Varinia begin to take on an overt tone of religiosity. Some critics suggest this adds an optimistic element to the story of the rebellion, serving to obviate the ultimate failure of the insurgency and the brutal death of Spartacus (Elley, 111–12). On the night before the last battle, the couple shares an intensely romantic and melancholy exchange, as Spartacus imagines a "god for slaves" and prays for his son to be born free. Spartacus, the father of the rebel family, now particularizes that status, as his child with Varinia becomes a symbol of the entire future of their movement: "Take care of my son, Varinia, and if he never knows me, tell him who I was and what we dreamed of." His wistful comment evokes the Old Testament hero, Moses, who led his people to a freedom he never enjoys, as well as the sacrificial lamb of Christ, who gave his life so that others might live. When Spartacus feels the baby kick, its life represents the future realization of their dreams: "As long as one of us lives," declares Spartacus, "we all live." The child symbolizes the enduring principles of the revolt, destined to be replayed every time individuals fight for their freedom.

In the last scene of the epic, Spartacus is shown crucified on the Via Appia, as Varinia stands beneath his cross holding their newborn son. The composition of this striking visual tableau invokes the two most important and iconic scenes of Christianity: the Nativity and the Passion (Babington and Evans, 194). Varinia wears a sea-foam blue robe, recalling the depiction of the Madonna in Western art, both new mother and *mater dolorosa*. As Varinia stands touching her husband's foot, begging him to die quickly, Batiatus confirms the religious imagery as he calls to her from the wagon: "Have mercy on us." The two scenes that bracket the film *Ben-Hur* here come together in one final representation, perhaps implying "divine sanction for radical social action" (Wyke, 71). Yet even with the grim spirituality of the final scenes, Varinia articulates the essential humanity of Spartacus: "He was a man who began all alone, like an animal. Yet on the



Plate 8 *Spartacus*: Varinia (Jean Simmons) and Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) experience a quiet moment during their march for freedom. Courtesy of Bryna/Universal/The Kobal Collection.

day he died, thousands and thousands would gladly have died in his place. He wasn't a god, he was a simple man . . . a slave. I loved him." The ending validates the personal legacy of Spartacus, while suggesting the fragility of any human endeavor.

### Themes and Interpretations

After the release of *Spartacus* in the fall of 1960, controversy over the crediting of blacklisted writers Fast and Trumbo erupted in right-wing quarters, prompting protests and attempts to boycott the film. As if to signal the changing times, newly elected President John F. Kennedy openly crossed a picket line to attend a screening of the film in Washington, DC, thereby mitigating some of the old Cold War anxieties. *Spartacus* was a major box-office triumph: with a production cost of \$12 million, the film grossed over \$60 million worldwide. The film was also a critical success,

nominated for six Academy Awards, and winning four statuettes, including Supporting Actor for Ustinov, Cinematography, Art Direction/Set Decoration, and Costume Design. In the tradition of earlier epic films like *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus* offers various levels of social and political analysis within its own historical and creative context. While the filmmakers somewhat diluted the novel's Marxist take on the class struggle, under apparent pressure from a studio worried that political controversy might harm profits, Douglas and Kubrick clearly wanted to make an activist statement about human rights and the passion for freedom (Cooper, 1996b). Even so, critics note the film's radical message was easily appropriated by conservatives as just another cinematic configuration of American faith and democracy fighting against oppressive atheist foreign powers, an attempt "to extricate Spartacus from his godless, ghastly Communist tradition and to convert him into a blameless spiritual reformer" (Wyke, 71).

Yet in the changing climate of the 1960s, with the erosion of the rigid Cold War culture of the previous decade and the election of the young, progressive President Kennedy, the film both occurs within and depicts onscreen a time of social and political transformation. *Spartacus* uniquely explores the period of transition between the end of the Roman Republic and its violent lurching into empire, a transition embodied in the film by the character of the young Julius Caesar. By casting a young American actor, John Gavin, to portray the historical Caesar, whose name would become synonymous with the end of the Republic, the film inverts the linguistic paradigm of earlier epic films and implies a stronger analogy between Roman and American imperialism. Gavin's muscular youth and vigor combine with a watchful, wary presence to denote a strong sense of history on the move; he becomes the physical symbol of the inevitable shift to autocratic government. The tense relationship between Crassus and his young contemporary is revealed in dialogue foreshadowing their future relationship beyond the time of the film: "I fear him [Spartacus], even more than I fear you, dear Caesar."

In portraying the conflicts among the Roman characters, the film depicts Rome less as the evil empire of earlier epic films, and more as a system bent on destroying itself through the political ambitions of a few arrogant men. The populist Gracchus is full of impatient sarcasm when he asks Crassus: "We buy everything else these days, no reason why we shouldn't be charged for patriotism: what's your fee?" When Crassus demands the first consulship along with command of all the legions, Gracchus sneers: "Dictatorship!" while Crassus corrects him: "Order." The film shows Caesar studying the maneuvers of Crassus and Gracchus, while

learning from their mistakes; Gracchus portentously refers to Caesar as a pupil who will become a teacher. Yet young Caesar is appalled when Gracchus engages with pirates to allow Spartacus to escape, thereby denying Crassus his power grab, but Gracchus is realistic: "Politics is a practical profession. If a criminal has what you want, you do business with him." Gracchus is the hardheaded pragmatist, Crassus is the power-hungry idealist, and from their examples Caesar invents a Roman leader incorporating the most advantageous aspects of both. As in *Ben-Hur*, the complex Roman figures in *Spartacus* offer an analogue to the debates among liberals and conservatives in American politics, and strike a cautionary note about the ideologies of empire and its perils.

In contrast to the intricate and dangerous web of politics at Rome, a culture debilitated from years of civil strife and poised on the edge of the totalitarian model, the rebel slaves enjoy a straightforward solidarity depicted in many optimistic shots of their encampment where together they construct a collective utopian society. *Spartacus* is the only ancient epic that "artistically, realistically, and sympathetically shows common people in a time when being common people was much worse than it is today" (Solomon, 2001a, 53). Yet the narrative challenge was to present a positive spin on the historical fact that the slave rebellion failed and did nothing to change the conditions of slavery in antiquity, which the film attempts to do by contrasting the unity of the slave brotherhood with the corrupt and unjust system of late Republican Rome (Elley, 112). When Spartacus finds his fellow rebels celebrating their freedom by matching captive Roman patricians in the arena, he rebukes them, like Moses scolding the reveling Israelites: "What, are we becoming Romans? Have we learned nothing?"

While the filmmakers wanted to show the slaves' many historical victories over the Roman troops to send a hopeful message about the fight against oppression, the final print of *Spartacus* contains very little of the rebels' successes, only their crushing defeat in the last battle, with the opposite implication: those who dare to rise up against authority will be annihilated (Cooper, 1996b). Thus the film resists any glorification of violent rebellion, focusing instead on a hero who becomes inexplicably more pacifist as the film continues. Critics note the historical substance of the film was reshaped, in particular by removing scenes of the slaves' military victories, under pressure from anxious studio executives: "During and after the editing process, Universal Studios deliberately censored the film's explosive historical content in order to keep it within the confines of the implicitly established mass media limits of acceptable political discourse circa 1959" (Cooper, 1996b).

With this downplaying of the rebel threat, and almost no exploration of the ideological conflicts inherent within revolutionary movements, the film's emphasis falls on a blunt contrast between the peaceful, life-affirming slave brotherhood and the cynical discord among the death-obsessed Romans. This distinction is austere expressed in visual setting and dialogue on the night before the final battle, where shots of Spartacus addressing the slave army near the sea at Brundisium are intercut with scenes of Crassus being confirmed as commander of the assembled legions in Rome (Futrell, 2001, 107-8). While the rebel leader speaks of their shared experience of freedom, Crassus vows by his deceased ancestors to subdue the revolt and restore order: "This I have sworn in the temple that guards their bones." In the extraordinary carnage after the battle, a victorious Crassus strides through the piled-up bodies of the fugitive slaves, who are locked together in a final familial embrace with expressions of contentment on their faces, like the Christian martyrs in the arena of *Quo Vadis*. Earlier, when Spartacus was asked if he would consider the rebellion worthwhile even if they were defeated, he replies: "A free man dies, he loses the pleasure of life. A slave loses his pain. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. That's why he's not afraid of it. That's why we'll win." The film closes with a much-simplified yet uncontroversial message: though the rebels are overwhelmed by the superior martial might of Rome, they win a larger moral victory with their heroic sacrifice for a noble cause.

Given such sharp political scrutiny, the film's narrative succeeds in confronting many issues important to liberal America in the early 1960s. Just as previous epic films used the depiction of repressive Roman rule to allude to the terror of the McCarthy years, *Spartacus* projects its ideal of human solidarity mindful of the severe punishments suffered by writers Fast and Trumbo as a result of the HUAC hearings just the decade before (Wyke, 67). In a famous scene after the concluding battle, Crassus threatens the slaves with execution unless they identify the rebel leader. As Spartacus rises to surrender himself, first Antoninus then thousands of chained slaves stand up and shout: "I am Spartacus!" The scene recalls and celebrates the heroism of artists who refused to "name names" when ordered by the committee to inform on their associates, and so faced the vindictive reprisals of incarceration and the blacklist; for their show of fraternal unity in tribute to their leader, the slaves in the film are crucified as an example against defiance. Even the self-absorbed Batiatus refuses to incriminate Spartacus at great personal cost: "Anyone who believes that I'll turn informer for nothing is a fool - I bore the whip without

complaint." As Gracchus observes with his trademark sarcasm: "Dignity and honesty in one afternoon – I hardly recognize you."

The film unequivocally condemns the police scare tactics of authoritarian governments in the following scene, when Gracchus is seized in the middle of the night and brought to the gloomy Senate House to be interrogated by Crassus. Surrounded by menacing guards, with all free political debate suppressed, Crassus threatens Gracchus with proscription: "The enemies of the state are known. Arrests are in progress. The prisons begin to fill. In every city and province, lists of the disloyal have been compiled." In the sinister belligerence of Crassus, the audience hears an echo of the nearly deranged ambition of Messala in *Ben-Hur* (Winkler, 2001c, 68–9). Just as Messala tried to manipulate Judah for his own cruel purposes, the increasingly autocratic Crassus attempts to use Gracchus and his popularity with the mob to further his fanatic obsession with power: "You will persuade them to accept destiny and order and trust the gods." Like Judah, Gracchus refuses to be part of a totalitarian Roman system, but he doesn't wait around to be punished; instead, like the cynical Petronius in *Quo Vadis*, he chooses the dignified exit of suicide.

*Spartacus* acknowledges the heightened intensity of the discourse of civil rights in the early 1960s by sustaining a pivotal role for Draba, the African gladiator, whose brave death is the catalyst for the slave uprising. Within the American popular context, as one scholar observes, "slavery partially operates as the originary economic institution that has laid the foundation of American racial oppression" (Wyke, 68). Actor Woody Strode was recognizable to American viewers as a symbol of individual triumph against racial discrimination, when in 1946 he became one of the first two black men to play in the National Football League, along with his UCLA teammate Kenny Washington; a third teammate, Jackie Robinson, would break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. His recent role in *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) as a falsely accused soldier of the Ninth Cavalry also fixed the actor's status as a heroic figure fighting against oppression. In his few brief scenes, Draba is set apart from the other slaves and specifically from Spartacus, whose friendly gesture he gravely declines: "You don't want to know my name. I don't want to know your name." The film underscores his difference from the others by openly commenting on his race, as when Lady Claudia chooses Draba as her champion: "I want the most beautiful: I'll take the big black one." After refusing to kill Spartacus for the entertainment of the Romans, Draba is punished for his principled defiance and his body suspended upside down from the roof of the gladiator barracks as a warning against rebellion. As Marcellus says:

"He'll hang there till he rots." The hanging of Draba recalls disturbing scenes of the lynching of young black men as a tool of intimidation in the American South, while the inversion of his dead body evokes the religious imagery of the martyrdom of St. Peter. As the camera follows the gaze of the restless gladiators with a slow, vertical shot down the length of Draba's body, the film stresses the iconic significance of the sight as the instigation for the revolution: the struggle of the black man becomes the visual icon of every man's struggle to be free. By reflecting the theme of racial equality in this episode, *Spartacus* responds to the centrality of black activism and civil disobedience as the civil rights movement began to gain momentum in the early 1960s.

The provocative treatment of sexuality in *Spartacus* also drew the attention of the studio censors. Before the film's release in 1960, the scene where Crassus tries to seduce Antoninus in the bath with the "oysters and snails" exchange, and thus an oblique reference to bisexuality, was cut by Universal under pressure from the American League of Decency. For the 1991 restoration, this scene was reinserted, but the sound track was damaged; so while Curtis was available to redo his lines, the voice of Olivier was dubbed by actor Anthony Hopkins, who is thanked in the credits at the end of the restored print. In the bath scene, Crassus employs the Socratic method to question his attractive slave as he proposes what can and cannot be examined through the lens of morality. He concludes that one's sexual proclivity is not a moral issue: "And taste is not the same as appetite and therefore not a question of morals, is it?" he asks Antoninus, who scrubs Crassus' back vigorously and replies, "It could be argued so, master." While recalling the bath scenes typical of the epic genre that usually display a languid Cleopatra or another temptress titillating her male visitors, the *Spartacus* bath sequence subverts the cinematic model by putting Crassus in the submerged feminine role, suggesting his sexual allure yet plainly undermining his masculine power. In the background is a tinkling Egyptian-sounding musical theme, heard only again when Crassus tries unsuccessfully to seduce Varinia. Thus the film depicts Crassus' sexuality as problematic in its ambiguity and futility, certainly unconventional in the eyes of a 1960s viewer, and generally evocative of affect-hungry Roman decadence. At least his refusal to assign ethical implications to "deviant" sexual practices implies he lacks moral compass. In its portrayal of Crassus, along with the cheerful promiscuity of Batiatus and Gracchus, the film describes Roman sexuality as lacking in traditional, fixed roles, with a dangerous penchant for flexibility in types of pleasures.



*Spartacus* continues the epic cinematic trend of exposing the naked male figure to the gaze of the audience, as in the bath scene above where Antoninus is the object of attempted seduction. Later in the Roman public baths, the film shows the strapping nude body of Caesar gliding through the pool to underscore his emergent political power, then juxtaposed to the softer body of Crassus as the two aristocrats debate the future of Rome clad only in tiny towels. As in earlier epic films, the nude male body suggests a visual negotiation between strength and vulnerability. At the *ludus*, the body of Spartacus is subjected to the gaze of the other gladiators during training: "Kirk Douglas' stance expresses a perfect balance between proud self-display and humiliating exposure" (Fitzgerald, 37). The pampered Roman ladies experience an erotic thrill from reviewing the line of male gladiators prepared to fight to the death, as Lady Claudia purrs: "Don't put them in those suffocating tunics. Let them wear just . . . enough for modesty." In this episode, women become the active subject of the gaze, suggesting a transition to the more sexually liberated female of the 1960s. The aroused Roman women even notice the powerful appeal of the slave girl, Varinia, whose sexuality is highlighted elsewhere in the film. Varinia's natural bath scene, where she reveals her nude body in a forest pool before announcing her pregnancy, associates her fertility with the life-giving properties of water. Spartacus, like the audience, is overcome by her erotic allure: "I want to make love to you," he growls. The scene becomes an intriguing precursor to the erotic and maternal strategies of the main character in *Cleopatra* (1963), in contrast to the cosmetic indoor luxury of the Egyptian queen's bath.

### CORE ISSUES

- 1 How does the film represent the moral quality of Roman political power and military leadership, especially in the character of Crassus?
- 2 How does the film characterize Spartacus and his army of slaves?
- 3 How does the film portray the conflict between rule and revolt? Between traditional order and personal freedom?
- 4 How do the themes expressed in the film about ancient slaves rebelling against the power of Rome suggest parallels to contemporary American life in 1960? How are those themes relevant to us today?
- 5 Describe the film's moral and/or political message

## Chapter 5

# Cleopatra (1963)

*The motion picture the world has been waiting for!*

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz  
 Screenplay: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Ranald MacDougal, and Sidney Buchman  
 C. M. Franzero (book)  
 Produced by: Walter Wanger for 20th Century Fox  
 Running Time: 246 minutes

### Cast

Cleopatra	Elizabeth Taylor
Julius Caesar	Rex Harrison
Mark Antony	Richard Burton
Octavian	Roddy McDowall
Rufio	Martin Landau
Sosigenes	Hume Cronyn
Apollodorus	Cesare Danova
Agrippa	Andrew Keir
Brutus	Kenneth Haigh
Cassius	John Hoyt
Flavius	George Cole
High Priestess	Pamela Brown
Cicero	Michael Hordern
Canidius	Andrew Faulds
Eiras	Francesca Annis
Charmian	Isabelle Cooley

*For Bart*

Warrior, Mentor, Hero

# BIG SCREEN ROME

*Monica Silveira Cyrino*

 Blackwell  
Publishing

© 2005 by Monica Silveira Cyrino

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING  
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2005

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Cyrino, Monica Silveira.

**Big screen Rome /** Monica Silveira Cyrino.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1683-1 (hard cover: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-1683-8 (hard cover: alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1684-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-1684-6 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Rome—In motion pictures. I. Title. PN1995.9.R68C87 2006  
791.43'6245632—dc22  
2005007235

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion  
by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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