



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 10  
2024

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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## Editorial

The *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* brings together students from all over the world with an interest in the ancient world. This broader scope does not restrict itself to considering only Greek and Roman cultures and civilisation or even to those other cultures and communities with which the Romans and Greeks interacted directly, but casts its interest even wider, gathering together other perspectives and approaches on cultures that we as Classicists would generally consider fully external to our interests.

In 2023, the Malta Classics Association was honoured and privileged to host this *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* here in Malta, with the support of the University of Malta's Department of Classics and Archaeology. The conference was held in hybrid format, with in-person attendees gathering within the welcoming rooms of the Malta Society of Art's Palazzo de La Salle between the 23rd and 24th of March. During these two days twenty-five speakers shared their research and exchanged reviews and ideas in a celebration of the ancient world and the various aspects of the study of these cultures.

The proceedings of nine of these presentations are now presented here, and we thank the authors for entrusting us with their work. We trust that these works will inspire you and encourage within you the desire to pursue your own research into these ancient cultures and their people, and our ongoing interaction with these materials.

Once again, this collection of research is being brought to you with the steadfast financial support of the Farsons Foundation, who have our enduring thanks.

Later this year, the Malta Classics Association will be hosting the *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in the Reception of the Ancient World*, and we look forward to bringing you more research by promising scholars from all over the world in future editions of our *Melita Classica*.

In the meantime, we thank you for your ongoing interest in and support of our work.

Samuel Azzopardi

Executive President and Editor

*In Memoriam*

The Malta Classics Association wishes to salute the memory of our dear friend, colleague teacher, mentor, former treasurer of the MCA and former editor of this same *Melita Classica*, Victor Bonnici, who left this world earlier this year. He is sorely missed.

## The Colosseum on the Silver Screen: The Allure of Hollywood Gladiators for the Alt-Right

*Alexandra Sills<sup>1</sup>*

The ‘alternative right’ (alt-right) is a political movement originating in the United States around 2008, whose extremist ideologies are rooted in white nationalism. Initially a fringe online community, they gained notoriety in 2014 for their involvement in ‘Gamergate’, a conservative backlash to feminism in the video game community. The incident led Neiwert to describe them as “an Internet presence beset by digital trolls, unbridled conspiracism, angry-white-male-identity victimization culture, and, ultimately, open racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual and gender paranoia. A place where human decency and ethics are considered antiquarian jokes, and empathy is only an invitation to assault.”<sup>2</sup> They then entered mainstream discourse for their fervent support of the presidential campaign of Donald Trump.

As with many extremist hate groups, the alt-right created their own catalogue of jargon, slogans, imagery, and symbols. Many are, by design, unintelligible to outsiders and function as a way to subtly display ideology and to signal fellow extremists. The use of a cartoon frog named Pepe is just one example of a seemingly benign image that has been infused with far-right ideology, gaining symbolic resonance.<sup>3</sup> Such subtle communication through an image or term is colloquially called a ‘dog whistle,’ because its coded message is only perceptible to a small percentage of those who encounter it. As it becomes increasingly politically incorrect in modern society to be openly racist, sexist, or homophobic, certain words and pictures are surreptitiously used in the stead of commonly understood derogatory terms, undetected by those not privy to the code.

Many conservative groups have long admired ancient Greece and Rome, and the alt-right are no exception as yet another group claiming to be the inheritors of

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1 Alexandra Sills is a graduate student at the University of Leicester School of Archaeology and Ancient History, researching the reception of Roman spectacle in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire.

2 Neiwert (2017) 215. Further reading on the history and ideology of the alt-right include Hawley (2017) and Main (2018).

3 Miller-Idriss (2019) 126.

Western (read: white) Civilization.<sup>4</sup> Many seek to track, catalogue and understand the symbols of the far-right, such as the Anti-Defamation League's Hate on Display Hate Symbols Database, though this database as yet has a single entry relating to antiquity.

Much attention has rightfully been paid to the resurgence of laconophilia amongst the far-right, particularly in the United States. The movie *300* (2006) provided fuel for this rejuvenation of idolisation, and since its release there has been an undeniable uptick in the misappropriation of Spartan imagery; the *Pharos Project* in particular has documented some of the most egregious examples.<sup>5</sup> Images of Spartan helmets and warriors adorn clothing, social media profiles and bumper stickers. Many are coupled with quotations of *molòn labé*,<sup>6</sup> often in response to calls for stricter gun control.<sup>7</sup> The phrase is now insidious enough to warrant its own entry on the Anti-Defamation League's online database, the sole catalogued example of misappropriated antiquity. The overt orientalism of the Persians in the movie,<sup>8</sup> the ableism and apocryphal eugenics of the Spartan society,<sup>9</sup> the homophobia and fascist aesthetic of the film<sup>10</sup> make the movie deeply problematic, and its cultural impact has been clearly visible with the amount of Spartan imagery on display at events such as the attack on the United States Capitol on the 6th January 2021.<sup>11</sup> Amongst these Spartan images and phrases, gladiatorial imagery can also be seen and cannot merely be attributed to perceived ignorance over the armature of Spartans.<sup>12</sup>

The penchant for gladiatorial imagery and idolatry within far-right groups is much deeper than self-identifying with warriors who upheld conservative ideas of masculinity. A substantial proportion of these groups have engaged with Roman spectacle purely through fictitious depictions of gladiators in modern

4 Zuckerberg (2008).

5 Dozier (2020) 259–60.

6 *Molòn labé* means 'come and take them' – a phrase that Plutarch (*Apophthegmata Laconica* 51) attributes to the Spartan King Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae, having been commanded by Xerxes to surrender all weapons. Those who misuse this phrase either ignore or are unaware that Xerxes did exactly as invited.

7 Use of the phrase in America is itself not a new phenomenon, being used (in translation) in the American Revolutionary War at Fort Morris (Stroud 2008) and in the Texas Revolution at the Battle of Gonzales – an annual re-enactment of which is called the 'Come and Take It Parade' (Anon. 02/10/2017)

8 Maruf (2014)

9 Rees (2020)

10 Plantinga (2019)

11 Dozier (14/1/2021)

12 Though such confusion can frequently be noted, the two images are distinct.

media. Specifically, if we look at gladiators in cinema and television, we find that narratively the historical role of gladiators has been so distorted as to become diametrically opposed to their initial function. Far from being a node in a system reinforcing state ideology, the gladiator is now apocryphally considered to be the figurehead of dissent. This figurehead can be adopted by many causes and can demonstrably be seen to be a current avatar for self-proclaimed 'warriors against wokery.'

By assembling several incidents in which gladiatorial iconography is used by those who ascribe to far-right ideology, examining how they use this imagery, I argue that the figure of the gladiator should now increasingly be considered a political dog-whistle. However, the adoption of gladiatorial iconography also shows a lack of understanding in the historical function of Roman spectacle, and so the fervour for gladiators which goes beyond hyper-masculinity also needs further investigation. Much vibrant work has been recently conducted on the topic of Roman spectacle, though this research is only slowly being disseminated into documentaries and articles aimed at the public.<sup>13</sup> Even so, outdated information cannot be held solely responsible for the fundamental misunderstandings of the purpose of gladiatorial combat amongst the far-right.

### Evoking The Gladiator in Political Discourse

Gladiatorial imagery was first used by the alt-right online. Donna Zuckerberg has already noted the alt-right's love/hate relationship with social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> As a movement with little organisation yet born on the internet, social media is a tool on which to rely for effective communication. Alt-right users who valued anonymity began by choosing 'gladiator' or gladiatorial terms as a component of screen names. Profile pictures of many alt-right accounts similarly feature images of gladiators, as either highly stylised artworks or images of gladiator characters such as Maximus from *Gladiator* (2000) or cast members of Starz' *Spartacus* series (2010–13.) As the gladiator was increasingly accepted as a symbol of the white heteronormative masculinity inherent in alt-right ideology, to self-identify with gladiators became a political statement beyond expressing a casual interest in ancient history. What follows is a selection of examples of gladiators being evoked to support far-right ideologies, taken from a wide range of media.

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13 Of particular importance are Kyle (1998), Junkelmann (2000) and Fagan (2011).

14 Zuckerberg (2018) 2

## A Dream That Was Rome

One prolific blogger encapsulates harmful engagement with gladiatorial spectacle, in this case the movie *Gladiator*. The blog was titled *A Dream That Was Rome*, and the author wrote under the pseudonym of Maximus Decimus Meridius.<sup>15</sup> The blog touts itself as “writings on man, masculinity and the emerging patriarchal renaissance,” with over eighty essays published in 2017 and 2018. Titles include ‘If a woman denies you sex, you have a problem – fix it,’ ‘Taking back the west – a patriarchal way forward for men’ and ‘Patriarchy is a choice: choose it or lose it.’ With no scholarship on antiquity referenced, ‘Maximus’ takes the film’s depiction of Rome and its politics at face value, and staunchly holds it as his utopian ideal. In one post he complains that historical figures including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas are being viewed by 21st century men as “mere intellectual curiosities, not guides,” but generally doesn’t engage with their writing.<sup>16</sup> The ancient world ‘Maximus’ wishes to emulate is purely imaginary.

One particular entry of note demonstrates how ‘Maximus’ is willing to mould his ideology around the film, rather than let aspects of its production challenge his worldview. In the post ‘Maximus and Juba – Blacks Will Join Whites to Save the West,’ ‘Maximus’ wrestles with the Djimon Hounsou’s casting and seeks to justify it to himself, an avowed white supremacist. Applauding Kanye West for his vocal support of Make America Great Again (MAGA) ideologies (described as West going ‘off plantation’ in a clear reference to American slavery) ‘Maximus’ claims that cultural Marxism has left the Black community in America worse off than under 1950s segregation, because movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) have led to worse race relations than the mid–20th century. Following this logic, ‘Maximus’ proposes that to Make America Great Again, it should return to those simpler times. He suggests that African Americans choose to stay in America rather than return to their “free brothers” in Africa because they have realised that “European culture is not African culture. It civilizes. It ennobles. It uplifts. It brings prosperity and peace.” In his opinion, Kanye is grateful that his ancestors were enslaved because it led to him having a “happy and prosperous” life in America.

The character of Juba is not mentioned beyond the title, and yet the existence of the character has prompted the blogger to consider race relations. Juba’s

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15 The blog is no longer live, but is archived here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180805124450/http://adreamthatwasrome.com/>

16 One exception is to use Plato’s *Republic* to criticise the ‘Red Pill’ movement, which ‘Maximus’ believes is the cause of fewer white babies being born, combined with feminism. Though dismissive of the ‘Red Pilled’ in their pursuit of sexual intercourse, Maximus nevertheless aligns with many of their other core beliefs. For more information about the ‘Red Pill’ movement and their interest in Classics, see Zuckerberg (2018).

characterisation as the Black Buddy has rightly been described as tokenistic.<sup>17</sup> He's noble, but deferential and subordinate to the white hero. As far as this blogger is concerned, the Black community clearly want the "civilized life" of white "European" man, which they will achieve only if they reject the "slavery" of the Democratic party and leftist grievances. Because Juba is perceived as willingly subservient to Maximus due to recognising Maximus' innate superiority as a white man, it is clear why 'Maximus' the blogger would be inspired to write this manifesto. It is apparently irrelevant that Juba showed no intention of staying in Rome, expressing his desire for his homeland, his wife and family, far from the Empire in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

## Bannon

Not all those who misunderstand and misrepresent spectacle are mere bloggers, however indicative of alt-right ideologies those blogs may be. In 2018, Steve Bannon, former political adviser to President Trump, announced that he was creating the 'Academy of the Judeo-Christian West.' The campus was to be an 800-year-old former Carthusian monastery in Italy, and the students were to be the populist politicians of tomorrow. The cohort would be selected of "people who have a sense that Western civilization is under threat," as Bannon's colleague Benjamin Harnwell put it, and the curriculum as described by *The New Yorker* was to be 'devoted to the intellectual underpinnings of Bannonism, a cocktail of populist nationalism, libertarianism, and traditional Catholicism, angled vehemently against the European Union, China, Islam, gay rights, Pope Francis, abortion, and the left. Course titles include "Cultural Marxism, Radical Jihad, and the C.C.P.'s Global Information Warfare" and "The Early Church as a Business Enterprise."<sup>19</sup>

The nickname for this far-right training ground, as coined by Bannon himself, was the Gladiator School. In an interview with *Axios*, Bannon described a module he intended to teach personally: a course entitled 'Gameness,' named for a term used in dog-fighting. "It's like when the dog has got his arm chewed off, he's still fighting."<sup>20</sup> The aim was to train a new generation of culture warriors to wage social media war on the woke and eradicate globalism from Europe.<sup>21</sup> After local

17 O'Brien (2014) 169

18 Djimon Hounsou's subsequent casting in *Gladiator II* signals that Juba too was denied a happy ending after Maximus' death.

19 *The New Yorker* (31/05/2021)

20 *Axios* (09/06/2019a)

21 *Axios* (09/06/2019b)

opposition, the school was evicted from the monastery before it could enrol students.<sup>22</sup>

## Birbalsingh

The gladiator as an American alt-right rhetorical motif is now increasingly adopted abroad. Katharine Birbalsingh is known as ‘Britain’s toughest headmistress’ and has publicly claimed that ‘girls dislike hard maths’<sup>23</sup> and that working class children shouldn’t aspire to attend Oxbridge.<sup>24</sup> In May 2023 Birbalsingh spoke at the National Conservatism conference in London, with her speech posted to social media.<sup>25</sup> In it she rails against those who would allow wokism to influence the education of British children, complaining that the younger generations are not conservative.<sup>26</sup> She mentions a clip from *Gladiator* that she claims to play regularly for her staff: “Hold the line! Stay with me! What we do in life echoes for eternity.” The phrase is spoken by Maximus to his troops before the battle against Germanic tribes. Birbalsingh has chosen a character who brought down corruption and aligned it with her own agenda, which is to eradicate the ‘corruption’ of left-wing ideologies from British schools. She mentions several times that ‘small c conservative’ teachers like herself are now rare, which has resulted in a culture that emphasises ‘identitarianism’ over nationalism.<sup>27</sup>

There are two ways to read why Birbalsingh would choose to quote this movie and specifically, this scene. The first is that Maximus is known as a noble hero who sacrificed himself excising corruption from Rome and returning it to its purest state. The quote may have been chosen for its recognisability over its narrative context and is merely used to evoke Maximus’ wider arc and characterisation. That certainly aligns with Pomeroy’s reading of the film as a call for a return to ‘traditional values,’ despite this reading aligning the left-wing with Commodus, who in the movie is very clearly coded as fascist.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps more pertinently, Commodus was depicted in the film as a deviant with incestuous desires. The second is that Birbalsingh does identify with the authority and dominance of the

22 *Guardian* (15/03/2021)

23 *BBC News* (27/04/2022)

24 *The Independent* (09/06/2022)

25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MYOH2Gs5TQ>

26 ‘Woke’ is a term with Black vernacular origins, used to describe those attentive to issues regarding racial and social justice. Conservatives have subsequently adopted the word as a pejorative to be aimed at leftists. See Jones (2023).

27 Presumably Birbalsingh is referring to identity politics here, rather than the Identitarian Movement of ultra-right ethno-nationalists as identified by Ebner (2019).

28 Pomeroy (2005) 122

Roman Empire, despite claims that she is in a minority, and that those on the left wing are akin to barbarians. In her speech, Birbalsingh laments that in ‘woke’ schools children are able to identify as they choose, using Furrries as an example.<sup>29</sup> This raises other concerning questions as to which other identities Birbalsingh will not tolerate in schools. Further, this suggests that in her quote, the Roman army are conservative adults working as educational authority figures and the Germanic tribes are adolescents who are navigating facets of their identity that do not align with conservative ideologies, and by extension leftist adults who support them. Shortly after Maximus’ speech, the army proceeds to annihilate the Germanic warriors. Maximus relishes this subjugation of a foreign people because he has “seen much of the rest of the world. It is brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light.” In this reading of Birbalsingh’s use of the initial quote, violence and suppression are necessary and justified if they result in bringing civilisation and the ‘correct’ ideology to ‘barbarians.’ But this is still a clumsy allusion to make in the context of Birbalsingh’s speech, as Marcus Aurelius immediately explains to Maximus why this viewpoint is naive; Rome is not the light after all, but deeply corrupt.<sup>30</sup> All that Maximus has succeeded in bringing is the brutal imperialism of a dominant power.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of her specific intention, Birbalsingh has indicated by evoking Maximus and *Gladiator* that her cause is noble, because Maximus is noble. Similarly, the ‘woke’ with whom she takes umbrage are positioned either as sexually deviant megalomaniacs or barbarians in need of brutal civilising, a worrying position given that her speech is about the education of adolescents.

## Rittenhouse

In August 2020, an unarmed Black man named Jacob Blake was shot seven times by a white police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Blake survived but was paralyzed from the waist down. The event sparked several days of civil unrest, leading to confrontations between BLM protesters and counter protesters. 17-year-old vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse crossed state lines to join the counter protesters, armed with an AR-15 style rifle. He shot three men, killing two. Christopher Miller, a Financial Times correspondent, reported via his twitter account @ChristopherJM that Sergey Korotkikh, a neo-Nazi leader of Ukraine’s Azov movement, was posting

29 The Furry community is interested in anthropomorphic animals, and often enjoy wearing costumes. They identify with animals, rather than as animals, as Birbalsingh claims. See *The Conversation* (2022).

30 Pomeroy (2005) 112

31 At the time of writing, the ‘Statement of Principles’ on the National Conservatism website explicitly condemns imperialism, so it is interesting to note that Birbalsingh quotes Maximus as he is performing an imperialist act. That said, earlier in the speech she recalls dismissing the concern of an Irish employee regarding the negative connotations of historic British imperialism. <https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>

memes glorifying the shooter online (28/8/2020.) Miller posted a screenshot of a meme sent by Korotkikh on Telegram, a messaging app notorious for its lack of moderation, frequently exploited by hate groups.<sup>32</sup> The image shows the painting *Pollice Verso* by Jean-Léon Gérôme with an image of Rittenhouse taken the night of the shootings in the place of the *murmillo*, the semi-automatic rifle replacing the gladius.

Rittenhouse was charged on seven counts, including one of first-degree intentional homicide using a dangerous weapon. The trial drew intense interest and the Kenosha County Courthouse saw both his supporters and protestors converge outside. A journalist documented one particularly striking homemade sign, which reads ‘SPQR. BLM. The “murderer” Kyle the Gladiator kills them all. The “biased-racist” judge Caesar Schroeder sorts them out.’<sup>33</sup> The sign was bedecked with the flag of the United States and was shaped like a cross.

Soon afterwards, two videos were uploaded to YouTube, celebrating Rittenhouse’s acquittal. Both used scenes from *Gladiator*, connecting Rittenhouse to Maximus. In the video uploaded by user “Lofti Pixels”, Rittenhouse’s face is superimposed onto the head of Russell Crowe during the scene where Maximus disrupts the re-enactment of the ‘Battle of Carthage’ (22/11/2021.) The presiding judge, Bruce Schroeder, was superimposed onto that of Joaquin Phoenix as Commodus. A second video uploaded by user “1stSpear” shows the aftermath of that battle, when Maximus is cheered by the gladiators in the hypogeum below, who are explained to be supporters of the Second Amendment (22/11/2021.)

## Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg

As a movement with little organisation, social media is a tool on which the alt-right rely for effective communication, and yet moderation of hate speech frequently leaves members banned from posting. The recent acquisition of Twitter by the billionaire Elon Musk was celebrated by the alt-right, as Musk proceeded to lift the bans of thousands of offending accounts, including that of Donald Trump.<sup>34</sup> Musk himself regularly tweets about what he calls the “woke mind virus,” taking particular aim at trans rights and peddling conspiracy theories.<sup>35</sup> Musk’s handling of Twitter has made it a haven for the far-right, where he promises Free (Hate) Speech without consequences.<sup>36</sup>

32 *Wired* (08/02/2022)

33 *Mic* (22/11/2021)

34 *The New York Times* (22/12/2022)

35 *Dazed* (11/05/2023)

36 *The Atlantic* (23/05/2023)

It is little surprise to learn he is considered a ‘gladiator’ by online admirers. This accelerated quickly in June 2023 when his rival Mark Zuckerberg announced that he would be launching a new direct competitor to Twitter called Threads, hiring many of the former Twitter employees that Musk had swiftly let go upon purchasing the website. Musk’s slapdash approach to Twitter left many users already looking for an alternative site.<sup>37</sup> Musk responded to this by challenging Zuckerberg to a cage match via Twitter on the 21st of June, to which Zuckerberg responded “Send me location” on his Instagram Stories, which his staffers confirmed was not a joke.<sup>38</sup> On the 30th of June, Italian ministers were forced to deny the claim made by *TMZ* that an employee of the Ministry of Culture had offered the Colosseum as the venue for the subsequent fight.<sup>39</sup> However, the rumour proved tantalising.

The Instagram user “@elon\_portraits” published three AI-generated artworks of Musk as a victorious gladiator in an amphitheatre in the first week of July 2023, and Facebook user Eric Beaulieu posted four AI-generated artworks of Musk and Zuckerberg facing each other in an arena to the Facebook group ‘Roman SPQRposting NON–Political Edition’ (sic) on the 1st of July. The same day, the moderator of the Facebook group ‘Possibly Controversial History Memes and Things’ posted a short clip from the 2022 History Channel docuseries about the Colosseum, using a scene in which actors recreate the bout of Priscus and Verus in the Colosseum’s inaugural Games. The faces of Zuckerberg and Musk have been superimposed on the actors, as the narrator describes that the winner will win freedom and the loser will die. Zuckerberg’s primary website Facebook is itself rather lenient towards far–right users,<sup>40</sup> however the alt–right seem to favour Musk. Musk tweeted “Zuck is a cuck” on the 9th of July 2023, an insult that is increasingly considered to have antisemitic connotations.<sup>41</sup> Zuckerberg is Jewish.<sup>42</sup> In this instance, two men arranged a modern fight and the alt–right users on their sites were the one to graft gladiatorial iconography onto it, which Musk enthusiastically encouraged.<sup>43</sup>

37 *Forbes* (12/07/2023) – 100 million users signed up to Threads on the day of its launch in July.

38 *The Verge* (22/06/2023)

39 *The Telegraph* (30/06/2023)

40 *Politico* (26/09/2020)

41 Kosse (2022)

42 A large number of the alt–right believe that there is a global Jewish “white genocide” conspiracy to cause the extinction of white people by means of interracial marriage, abortion, forced assimilation and murder.

43 On August 25th 2023, Boris Johnson wrote in his *Daily Mail* column encouraging readers to consider what this fight could teach Britons about how to make ‘Brexit Britain’ richer. Johnson challenged the winner to a *pankraton* fight, a characteristic misfire of an attempt to use his Oxford Classics degree to appear authoritative and sensible. See *The Guardian* (6/10/2019).

## Who Is the Alt Right Gladiator?

The alt-right gladiator is a man who is perceived to be capable of challenging malevolent agents of leftist ideologies and restoring the pre-eminence of heterosexual white men. It is a mantle that is conferred more often than it is adopted, as a marker of respect and admiration. Unlike the metropolitan elites who are believed to dominate politics and influence the culture wars of the 21st century, the alt-right gladiator is perceived to be a man of the common people. He has rough edges, is disinterested in following the staid etiquette of politics, and is willing to disrupt The Establishment with his unconventional tactics. His purpose is to represent those who feel their voices are too often stifled, and to promote their cause in unorthodox ways, including, where necessary, with violence. Like Spartacus, he will heroically set them free and lead the charge against their perceived oppressors, in this case the leftist 'wokerati.'

## Is He Rooted in Scholarship?

Späth and Tröhler point out that giving Spartacus the mantle of hero, Marxist or otherwise, would have been an anathema in antiquity; heroes upheld societal norms in a society that reserved exemplarity for the aristocracy.<sup>44</sup> Our modern fascination with him was similarly not shared by ancient writers, where he is infrequently mentioned.<sup>45</sup> He lost. Great Men won, and balance was restored. It is only as we now survey the wreckage of the Roman Empire that we wonder at how close Spartacus came to destroying it. Our modern fascination is borne of a respect he was never previously given and has led to him becoming a household name long after his death. This is not a level of recognition that other, more typical gladiators command in modern culture, and in America this can be largely attributed to the 1960 Kubrick movie. Spartacus' current fame has led to a muddying of who gladiators were, and what they stood for. Spartacus was an anomaly of the gladiatorial profession, and after his death in 71 BCE his defiance was never again replicated amongst the *ludi* across the empire. It is the tropification of screen gladiators that has created a cohort of rebels and revolutionaries who exist to challenge state ideology, to the point where members of the public who engage with Roman spectacle purely through cinema have started to conflate this fiction with the historical role of gladiators. As such, the realities of ancient spectacle needs must be reiterated regularly.

Erik Gunderson has compellingly argued that the Colosseum was, in line with Althusser's model, an Ideological State Apparatus – it was a vehicle for

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44 Späth and Tröhler (2013) 45–46

45 Späth and Tröhler (2013) 46–47

the dissemination of Roman virtues, imperialism, and social stratification.<sup>46</sup> Spectators were prompted to evaluate the importance of strength and martial skill. They deliberated over when mercy was an appropriate response to defeat, and they were asked to consider how to treat the vanquished; a question that grew weightier as the Empire expanded. The Colosseum was a practical, tangible demonstration of domination and subjugation. Here, Romans learned how to deal out death without hesitation.

On the arena floor itself, the gladiator was a teaching tool of how to accept death without hesitation. He was the epitome of hypermasculinity, martial prowess and courage. The gladiator was proof that even the most unsuspecting of men: an enslaved man, a prisoner of war, a barbarian, could each embody the Roman ideal of masculine perfection and die neither fearful nor flinching. A gladiator was a walking piece of propaganda for the domination of Rome over its enemies, its imperial subjects, and its own anxieties. A gladiator did not question Rome, did not challenge Rome. They were the medium through which the Roman state disseminated subliminal ideology, cloaked in the guise of leisurely entertainment. Ironically, the nearest modern equivalent would be modern American war movies, which teach the same lessons about courage, mortality, and imperialism.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, stories on screen that copy–paste Spartacus into various new settings and guises have turned the role of gladiator on its head. Because the gladiatorial prototype for Hollywood is an historical aberration and biographical details of other historical gladiators are practically non–existent, the gladiators most people are familiar with are fictional or fictionalised, and they are nothing like their historical counterparts. Hollywood gladiators, or the protagonists at least, refuse to be institutionalised, manipulated, or exploited. They aren't afraid to point out the flaws in the political system and to challenge the politicians who strive to uphold it. They are no longer cogs of the Ideological State Apparatus, they are spanners thrown into its machinery threatening to destroy it from within.

## Rooted in Cinema

*Gladiator* has not had as much of an overt influence on far–right imagery as *300*, but its impact is still significant. As with the Spartan mirage and the careless depiction of Sparta on film, the fervour for gladiatorial imagery amongst the far–right seems to stem from a general misunderstanding about Roman spectacle amongst the general public, through anachronistic depictions of spectacle in cinema.

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46 Gunderson (1996)

47 Sills (2023b) page?

My suspicion is that this admiration stems from the metamorphoses of the gladiator from an anonymous symbol of Roman *virtus* and imperialism to the principled opposition to oppression. This is a trend that began with modern cultural depictions of Spartacus and solidified as subsequent cinematic homages to *Spartacus* (1960) created a trope of the gladiator as a people's hero.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Hollywood gladiators raging against the arena machine, most characters are rather conservative, rarely objecting to exploitative institutions such as slavery or spectacle until they themselves are exploited. Few screen gladiatorial arcs end with the abolition of blood sports, and even fewer with a removal of corrupt politicians or political systems.<sup>49</sup> Screen gladiators often speak of freedom and equality for all, but most are content to save their own skin. This is a result of the drastic changes made to the character of Spartacus during production of the 1960 movie which reduced him from the Marxist Messiah of the novel it was based on and its screenplay adaptation, both written by American communists, to a man predestined to fail without posing any credible threat.<sup>50</sup> This defeatist reduction, influenced by nervous studio executives cowed by McCarthyism, has led to subsequent homages considering their own protagonists triumphant no matter how meagre their victory. In *Gladiator*, Maximus is one of the few to bring about actual change, albeit not a change depicted on screen. It is this rare success, as well as his characterisation, which makes him particularly attractive to the alt-right. Maximus replaces the doomed, diluted leftist Spartacus with a small 'c' conservative martyr, a preferable alternative for the gladiator of choice.

## What Makes Cinematic Gladiators Attractive?

### 1. Misogyny

There is still some gender disparity amongst Hollywood gladiators, although the gap is closing. Luckily, most female gladiators are portrayed as utterly capable fighters, even if in some cases martial prowess is played up for comedic purposes.<sup>51</sup> If the reversal of gender norms is used as a punchline, the women who conform to them more rigidly are often more unkindly treated; the character of Shahná

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48 Sills (2023a) 114

49 Sills (2023a) 129

50 Cooper (2007a) and (2007b)

51 Sills (2023a) Lana, Pam and Cheryl from *Archer* have no qualms fighting in S10E2 'Happy Birthday', and Holga's superior fighting skills serve a repeated comedic function to emphasise her 'unfeminine' persona and Edgin's 'unmasculine' lack of combat expertise in *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023).

in the *Gamesters of Triskelion* episode of *Star Trek: The Original Series* is an excellent example. She is a Thrall, an enslaved humanoid forced to fight for the entertainment of others. Her martial skills are demonstrably admirable, and she is going toe-to-toe with Captain Kirk in the arena as a near equal. However, her characterisation is of an ingénue dressed in sexually provocative clothing. Kirk sexualises her under the guise of civilising her and discards her when she expresses an interest in feeding her newfound curiosity by leaving her home planet with him. Of course, a wiser character than Shahna wouldn't have been able to fulfil the role of love-interest-of-the-week. This example dates from 1968, but further, newer examples reveal that feminism is still often a missing feature from gladiatorial stories.

In *Gladiator*, the most able politician in the entire movie is clearly shown to be Lucilla, Commodus' sister. She is astute, gifted in diplomacy, and intelligent. Early in the film, her father Marcus Aurelius tells her "If only you had been born a man, what a Caesar you would have been!" Later, it is Lucilla who defuses a tense interaction between Commodus and the Senators, with senator Gracchus saying, "My lady, as always your lightest touch commands obedience." Her power, influence and abilities are plainly considerable and respected by those with whom she converses.

The historian knows that Lucilla cannot ultimately triumph; her historical counterpart was executed after Commodus foiled her plot.<sup>52</sup> In Franzoni's original screenplay of the film, Commodus does indeed have Lucilla killed after the plot is revealed.<sup>53</sup> It took the opposition of the only woman in the film's production team to prevent the death of the only female member of the cast with dialogue; just before filming commenced Laurie McDonald objected to Lucilla's death being used as fridging, a narrative trope wherein the death of a woman is used to stimulate a male character's desire for revenge.<sup>54</sup> This is to McDonald's credit, for the movie had already done this with the murder of Maximus' silent wife. Lucilla's apocryphal survival, therefore, has nothing to do with her political talent and everything to do with letting one sole female character actually survive the film. In the final scenes, her brother is dead and the Republic to be restored, but she cannot claim any credit, which naturally is solely reserved for Maximus. Lucilla failed.

The film is explicit as to why; her fallibility stemmed from her role and identity as a mother. She takes many risks plotting to overthrow Commodus, but her

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52 Cassius Dio (73.4) and Herodian (1.8) differ as to the historical Lucilla's motivations for the plot to kill her brother. Herodian's account matches more closely to the narrative in the movie.

53 Solomon (2005) 12.

54 Albu (2008) 194.

son is the one person she refuses to lose to collateral damage, and she gives up completely as soon as Lucius is directly threatened. Standing over the body of Maximus, Lucilla's final line is "Is Rome worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again," despite being unwilling to lose her son to the same cause. That is why Marcus Aurelius laments her being born a woman; her maternal instincts de-claw her, they make her weak and susceptible and skew her priorities as a politician. The message that women are inherently unsuited to the political sphere because of the weaknesses of their gender is certainly conservative.

So what of a modern female gladiator? Katniss Everdeen is one of only two screen gladiators to overthrow a government.<sup>55</sup> However, of all the major decisions in the series, Katniss arguably only makes two herself. Firstly, she enters the Hunger Games as a volunteer, a choice she would never have made until her younger sister Primrose was selected in the ballot known as The Reaping. Secondly, she assassinates President Coin, leader of the District Rebellion, instead of President Snow, leader of the Capitol.

Throughout the whole series she needs to be cajoled or provoked to action, much of which occurs through manipulation from enemies and friends alike. Katniss spends much of her time reacting to others; she does not choose to become a rebellion figurehead, a role to which she is oblivious for her entire second games, which she in turn did not wish to participate in. She did not choose most of her allies in those games nor to be taken to District 13 when they prematurely ended. And crucially, as much as she despises the cruelty and decadence of the Capitol, she is as distrustful of the subterranean, communist-coded District 13, with their rigidity and removal of individuality.

Her suspicions of Alma Coin are proved correct when it is revealed that Coin ordered a bomb strike on Capitol refugee children. The bombs, designed to look like Hunger Games 'gifts,' had a delayed second detonation to kill as many medics attending the children as possible. Primrose, the sister Katniss volunteered to sacrifice herself in order to save, was amongst the fatalities. Worse, Coin proposes reviving the Hunger Games using Capitol children as Tributes. The series could not be more explicit: rampant capitalism is abhorrent, but communism should never be considered a preferable alternative and is just as susceptible to malevolent politicians. And so Katniss' second major decision is to reject communism by removing its leader, and only then can the Capitol's corruption end. Much as Maximus intended, once the job is done Katniss does not hang around to see anacyclosis through; she retires to a rural life as a wife and mother. Katniss spent

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55 Sills (2023a) 131 – it should be noted that Maximus was once a third, though the existence of a sequel in which we learn that the Republic was not reinstated now discounts him.

four films challenging gender stereotypes; she prefers gender neutral clothing, is not content to stay at home like her mother and sister and outperforms many of her male opponents. She rails against gender expectations such as the haute couture she must wear for interviews and the manufactured love story that will earn her sponsors. Her rejection of gender norms render her unappealing to both Hunger Games fans in the Capitol and those who interact with her personally, and she requires the aid of Peeta, her stylist Cinna and mentor Haymitch amongst other male characters to soften her image, aid that she largely resents.<sup>56</sup> And yet in the final scene, Katniss Everdeen, the Girl of Fire, is shown to have finally found peace on her homestead, holding a baby, and wearing a pretty floral sundress.

## 2. Race

If feminism hasn't fully penetrated the gladiatorial trope, it is more successful than racial diversity. Gladiatorial combatants are overwhelmingly white, and most gladiators of colour cannot be counted as protagonists. Greenhalgh has delineated the narrow band of supporting roles in which black actors have been relegated in historical gladiator stories: the 'magical negro' or 'buddy side-kick' who exist only to provide the white protagonist with their wisdom and support at the expense of their own welfare.<sup>57</sup> That chapter studies Glycon in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954,) Draba in *Spartacus* (both the 1960 movie and 2004 miniseries,) Juba in *Gladiator* (2000,) Oenomaus in the Starz *Spartacus* series (2010–13) and Atticus in the 2014 film *Pompeii*. The evidence is damning; in the swords and sandals genre, race is still viewed through the lens of 1960s America. In 1960, Draba might have been seen as a symbol of the contemporary civil rights movement, but the hold Kubrick's movie has on the genre has meant that so far, no black gladiator has been allowed to fully break free from the role of token Black sidekick. I would argue that no male Black gladiator after Draba is given his agency; they merely transfer their allegiance, obedience, and deference to a different white man.

This is a shame that this has yet to be rectified, particularly as many classicists work hard to dispel the myth of a purely white ancient Mediterranean. Archaeological evidence does, for instance, provide a historical model for a Black gladiatorial protagonist. The Colchester Vase depicts a gladiatorial fight that researchers believe was a real event important enough to be commemorated in art.<sup>58</sup> It was produced locally in Colchester in the 2nd century CE and the inscription above the image of a *secutor* versus a *retiarius* states that the victor was named Memnon. A Homeric *nom de guerre* was common amongst gladiators, and those

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<sup>56</sup> Burke and Kelly (2015) 67.

<sup>57</sup> Greenhalgh (2023) 51–53.

<sup>58</sup> Davis and Pearce (forthcoming).

familiar with the epic cycle will recall that Memnon was an Ethiopian king. It is likely, therefore, that the Colchester gladiator chose his stage name to match his own African origins. It is entirely historically accurate to depict black gladiators, but modern ideas about race are still preventing us from depicting them in truly equal terms as their comrades, an equality that they would have experienced in antiquity.

Black gladiators in other genres fare little better. Star Trek's *Gamesters of Triskelion* saw Lt. Uhura, played by Black actor Nichelle Nichols, enter the arena. 10 months after this episode aired, Uhura's character was the subject of much controversy; in the 1968 episode *Plato's Stepchildren* she was depicted kissing Cpt. Kirk, the first interracial kiss between a white man and a Black woman shown on television.<sup>59</sup> In *Gamesters*, Uhura is once again negatively sexualised.<sup>60</sup> It is implied that she is sexually assaulted by her white trainer offscreen, and we hear her screams of resistance.<sup>61</sup> Later, when training in the arena, a Black thrall is accused of slowness to obey orders and the others are instructed to use him as a target. Despite all three Starfleet characters voicing refusal, Uhura, the only other Black character present, is the only one ordered to be bound and beaten in what is implied to be an often fatal form of punishment. It is only when Cpt. Kirk in his role of white saviour offers to take the punishment in her stead that she is rescued. Compare this to the treatment of Black gladiators in historical stories: as recently as 2013 Black characters have received different treatment from their white counterparts. Whilst the Starz *Spartacus* series often showed the varying methods of retribution the Romans used against rebel slaves, it is noteworthy here that, reminiscent to the lynchings in America and the hanging of Draba in the 1960 movie, the only two slaves depicted hanging from a tree are Black.<sup>62</sup>

In the *Hunger Games* franchise there are also parallels with the stereotypes Black gladiators are burdened with in historical cinema. In the first film, Thresh and Rue are the tributes from District 11. Rue is a young girl who reminds Katniss of her sister Primrose, and Katniss allies with and attempts to protect Rue in the arena, particularly after Rue saves her life. Katniss cannot reciprocate, and weeps as she sings a lullaby to the girl dying in her arms. Shortly after she respectfully tends to Rue's body, Katniss shows a three finger hand gesture to the arena

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59 Bernardi (1997) 216.

60 The kiss in *Plato's Stepchildren* cannot be considered romantic, as both characters are being manipulated against their will and their reluctance is palpable. The kiss is not the watershed moment for interracial romance that it is often purported to be.

61 Minutes later, Cpt. Kirk has forgotten his concern for Uhura and is sexually harassing his own trainer Shahna.

62 Greenhalgh (2023) 61.

cameras.<sup>63</sup> This salute inadvertently becomes the silent symbol of the nascent District Rebellion. Thresh is an older Tribute with a much darker skin tone. Like the Black gladiators in historical cinema, he is a physically imposing man who is shown to be a formidable opponent, shown easily dispatching two other Tributes. Like Draba, he spares Katniss due to his personal code of honour, as he is aware of how she tried to save Rue and cared for her body. Such respect for the dead is not displayed by the ‘Career’ Tributes who serve as the main antagonists within the arena. Thresh is killed off–camera, a necessary end to prevent the audience seeing Katniss forced to kill him herself. It is Thresh and Rue, then, who retain their honour and humanity more than the white characters, serving by turns to save Katniss, die to provide her with the will to triumph, and show her mercy in a merciless spectacle. It is their deaths, particularly Rue’s, combined with the sympathy Katniss and Peeta show their families when they visit what appears to be a predominantly Black district (a direct contrast to District 12,) that is the catalyst for the District Rebellion. In a 2011 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, the author of the novels, Suzanne Collins, states that she wrote her characters to be ethnically mixed, given that the story is set in an America centuries from now.<sup>64</sup> However, both the books and the film set Rue and Thresh apart as being specifically African American. The Capitol and all the depicted Districts bar 11 are overwhelmingly white on screen. Characters of colour are few and far between, usually shown as individuals amongst white groups, such as Cinna and Beetee, suggesting non–white communities outside of 11 are rare.<sup>65</sup> Far from a post–racial world of ethnic ambiguity, characters of colour and conspicuous in their minority, and largely segregated from the rest of society. Far from a future free of racial tensions, the dystopian Panem seems to show a return to an outdated model of racial separation and exploitation, which remains unaddressed at the end of the final film.

### 3. Homophobia

Those looking for positive queer representation amongst screen gladiators will find it only in Starz’ *Spartacus* series. To their credit, the series portrays queer relationships amongst gladiators as an accepted norm that requires no commentary, which may at first be surprising given the clear aesthetic parallels of

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63 The novel elaborates further; the Three Finger Hand Salute is a long–standing tradition of District 12, where Katniss is from. It is antiquated and infrequently used by this time, usually at funerals as a gesture of love, appreciation and saying a farewell to a loved one.

64 This did not influence the casting of the main characters for the films, who are overwhelmingly white.

65 Burke and Kelly (2015) 63.

the series to *300*, a film that clearly promotes heteronormativity. The series depicts queer casual sex and romantic relationships alike, with at least one committed relationship depicted each season.<sup>66</sup> However, in the first series, the three named queer characters with dialogue admittedly all die by violence by the midpoint of the season, conforming to the long-established trope colloquially known as ‘bury your gays,’ in which queer characters are stereotypically denied happy endings. Barca, the Beast of Carthage is shown to be in a committed relationship with Pietros, a *ludus* slave. Barca is murdered, and soon after Pietros dies by suicide after enduring repeated sexual assaults from the gladiator Gnaeus. Gnaeus is then murdered for this transgression. Whilst it is noteworthy that only one of the three was depicted as a sexual predator, West notes that the other couple of Agron and Nasir survive to see a happy ending specifically because they were each equally as hypermasculine as each other and their peers.<sup>67</sup> Agron and Nasir’s plot line could be seen as an effort to move away from harmful tropes, however, and they remain the only queer gladiators to survive a movie or series. That their relationship is otherwise unremarkable from the heterosexual relationships around them is extremely remarkable in itself, and as Potter points out is in direct contrast to queerness being depicted as deviant behaviour, such as the Snails and Oysters scene from Kubrick’s *Spartacus* that was deleted by censors.<sup>68</sup> Starz’ inclusivity is very much the exception to the rule.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4. Masculinity

The average screen gladiator is a cisgendered, heterosexual white male.<sup>70</sup> He is also likely to be highly muscled and physically imposing. The average screen gladiator is also taciturn and stoic, with any emotional outbursts rarely depicted, apart from rage.

One of the core narrative components of the Hollywood gladiator trope is demotion.<sup>71</sup> For protagonists, being thrown into the arena is usually a significant reduction, if not complete loss, of prestige, rank, and liberty. Nearly every gladiatorial screen story sees their characters captured or enslaved, and to emphasise this dramatic change in fortune, there will usually be at least one scene depicting a more privileged life as free men. The removal of rank and liberty

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66 West (2016) 143.

67 West (2016) 144.

68 Potter (2017) 162.

69 See Pierce (2011) 44–46 for discussion on how *Gladiator* ensured that Maximus was “safely heterosexualised.”

70 Sills (2023a) 116.

71 Sills (2023a) 117.

is a prime motivator for the protagonist to rebel against the system he deems responsible.

For this reason, it is easy to see why members of the alt–right may identify with these characters. In his book *Angry White Men*, Kimmel details the phenomenon which he calls ‘aggrieved entitlement.’<sup>72</sup> Having been taught to expect the highest tier of social and economic privilege, (some) white American men feel cheated out of their inheritance in a political landscape of increased rights for women and minority groups. Feminism, the civil rights movement and increased visibility and tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community has improved the lives of many members of marginalised groups, which is seen by some white American men as a zero sum game in which they lose pre–eminence. Kimmel’s *Angry White Men* feel a sense of loss akin to that of the gladiators on screen, and like these characters they are wont to fight to restore what they believe they are entitled to.

## 5. Return to an Idealised Past

In his discussion of Maximus’ masculinity, Fradley identifies another facet of his characterisation that directly appeals to the American alt–right: “the pastoral idyll of fecundity and self–sufficiency that is the American Dream–homestead to which he longs to return.”<sup>73</sup> Even as he physically prepares to annihilate the Germanic tribes near Vindobona, mentally Maximus is home at his Tuscan farm, running his hand over ears of wheat. At the film’s denouement, his elysium is the same farm replicated in the afterlife, a far cry from the metropolis he came to disdain.<sup>74</sup>

Other gladiators show a clear preference or nostalgia for a simple, subsistence life in a rural setting. We have already noted Katniss on her homestead, and Starz’ *Spartacus* and *Pompeii*’s Milo both pine for the villages they came from before their enslavement by Romans. The Capitol of the *Hunger Games*, the Capua of Starz’ *Spartacus* and the Pompeii of the titular 2014 movie are all shown to be the homes of corrupt elites who engage in dishonourable and dissolute behaviour, a familiar charge that American conservatives level against ‘metropolitan elites.’ Many gladiatorial stories in sci–fi and fantasy genres frequently place their amphitheatres in cultures foreign to the protagonist.<sup>75</sup> These cultures are similarly shown to be urban and debauched, such as the planet of Sakaar in *Thor: Ragnarok* and the fighting pits of Essos in *Game of Thrones*.

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72 Kimmel (2013).

73 Fradley (2004) 242–3.

74 Pomeroy invites us to look unfavourably on urban Rome as well, with the first shot of the city closely mirroring Leni Riefenstahl’s cinematography in *Triumph of the Will*, her propaganda film recording a 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg (2005) 114–117.

75 Sills (2023a) 127.

The promotion of a simple life of hard, honest work is deeply embedded in the American psyche, stemming from Jefferson's agrarian vision of a nation in which every free man owned a farm.<sup>76</sup> Whilst I am far from suggesting that every member of the alt-right seeks to work the land, there is a nostalgia present both for the idealised past of the ancient Mediterranean and for the early United States. In both, the alt-right see periods in which the straight white man still reigned supreme, and unfortunately most cinematic gladiatorial stories provide such a picture; metropolitan elites are decadent and deviant, women (if they are granted dialogue) are weak and in search of male authority, and people of colour are deferential and obedient. This aligns with the clumsy readings of antiquity in which the alt-right project this apocryphal utopia; as Donna Zuckerberg puts it: "They elide the immense differences between our society and classical antiquity to attempt to prove the incontestable value of patriarchy and white supremacy—and to argue for the reinstatement of those oppressive systems of power today."<sup>77</sup>

### Cinematic Gladiators in the Trump Era

Much of the scholarship regarding *Gladiator* was written swiftly following its release, before the rise of the alt-right movement. Martin Winkler edited a volume entitled *Gladiator: Film and History* in 2005, and in 2008 Emily Albu authored an article mapping the political landscape of America at the moment the movie was released in 2000, which influenced its reception. Reading certain elements of this scholarship is an interesting, if jarring, experience in a post-Trump world. For instance, Cyrino compares the villainous Commodus' childish petulance with that of George W. Bush,<sup>78</sup> Albu notes that Clinton's affair with Lewinsky was the very height of political scandal,<sup>79</sup> and Pomeroy suggests that the movie does little to commend fascism, perhaps implying that fascists will similarly find little in the film to commend.<sup>80</sup> He then suggests that the film merely promotes 'neo-conservative rural utopianism', in which he finds parallels in Victor Davis Hanson's oeuvre.<sup>81</sup> Written before the rise of the alt-right movement, it is now clear that the popularity of the movie amongst the politically extreme has proven this to be optimistic. Hanson, whose own immoderate politics have been increasingly reactionary since 2005, has coincidentally called Donald Trump a gladiator twice;

76 Krall (2002) 131.

77 Zuckerberg (2018) 44.

78 Cyrino (2005) 146.

79 Albu (2008)186.

80 Pomeroy (2005) 123.

81 For an alternate view on Hanson's agrarian ideologies, see duBois (2001) 34–38.

in a 2016 article for the *National Review* prior to the presidential election, Hanson describes Trump as “a gladiator, and his supporters are shrieking, thumbs-down spectators.” His supporters are thus described with the same condescension as the ‘mob’ who are repeatedly discussed by elites in *Gladiator*. The context seems to be that these Trump supporters feel that the only way to oust hypocritical elites from political power is to send in their gladiator, rather than another hypocritical elite. This article is hardly complimentary to Trump as a whole, but this use of gladiatorial imagery isn’t as pejorative as it seems. This is an image of a gladiator that citizens trust to disrupt the status quo and challenge those in power, an image that has no basis in spectacle scholarship and has fundamentally misunderstood the role of gladiator in the Roman ideological state apparatus and the enforced social denigration of gladiators as a class. The image only makes sense if Hanson’s understanding of the purpose of a gladiator is lifted from cinematic, fictional depictions of gladiators. The most obvious inspiration would be Maximus Decimus Meridius, the protégé of an emperor, commander of a Roman legion, but ultimately a simple farmer that managed to end the rule of a hypocritical elite to usher in a new age of old-fashioned values. If Pomeroy were correct about *Gladiator* and Hanson’s political ideologies aligning, then the description of Trump as a gladiator in *National Review* is not the sneer it appears to be.

Hanson describes Trump as a gladiator again in his 2019 book *The Case for Trump*, in a more overtly positive manner. Within three years, Hanson had transformed from a Trump sceptic to sycophant, and the book is less an argument as to Trump’s suitability as a *rector rei publicae* and more a litany of why his opponents would be comparably more detrimental if voted in. In the book Hanson plays up to his classicist credentials to similarly compare Trump favourably to Ajax, Achilles, Augustus and Alexander the Great. Whether those comparisons are appropriate is beyond the remit of this paper, but I can speak to this second use of ‘gladiator.’ It is used to portray Trump as the veteran brawler, whose repeated victories in the arena leave opponents (Hanson mentions Joe Biden and Jim Acosta) reluctant to engage in bouts. It is an odd way to describe Trump’s habit of repeatedly tweeting garbled insults at people, and one that again falls apart as an historical allusion unless seen through the lens of cinematic gladiators.

The Roman arena was not a place where two combatants from opposing ideologies duked it out for supremacy. The amphitheatre was not a medium for debate. There was a single ideology, that of the Roman state, and the gladiators existed to demonstrate it. Describing Trump as the gladiator whom opponents fear to engage only works if Hanson is alluding to cinematic bouts. Ideologies clashing on the arena sand are a Hollywood invention, and by framing throwing insults at political rivals on social media in this way, Hanson demonstrates both his penchant for hyperbole and his incomprehension of the historical nature of spectacle. Unfortunately, because of Hanson’s academic position, his readers amongst the

far-right have little reason to question his understanding on the subject and may assume that such comparisons to gladiators aren't entirely apocryphal. Amongst them is Sean Hannity, who, after the first presidential election debate between Trump and Biden on the 29th September 2020, described Trump as a 'gladiator warrior fighter, [...] a guy who is willing to go to battle' on Fox News.<sup>82</sup>

In 2024, *Gladiator II* will be released in late November, mere weeks after America casts their votes as to whether Donald Trump deserves a second term as President.<sup>83</sup> It is certainly debatable whether either the original movie or the 45th President should receive a second outing, largely because of the denouements of their first instalments.

On the 6th of January 2021 following the Presidential election of Joe Biden, Trump spoke at a 'Save America' rally in Washington D.C, resulting in his supporters storming the Capitol.<sup>84</sup> Signs, slogans and costumes included multiple references to antiquity. Predictably, there were multiple references to Sparta. But also amongst the rioters was a man named Nathan Wayne Entrekin, who came dressed as a gladiator. It's not a recognisably gladiatorial outfit, per se, as it features a dark purple cloak fastened at one shoulder, a faux-leather cuirass, a vambraces and pteruges combination and no helmet to speak of. Entrekin accessorised his outfit with jean shorts, leather sandals and a homemade sword.<sup>85</sup> Whilst the costume is barely recognisable as gladiatorial, it does seem to be a standard costume marketed as such by the American retailer Spirit Halloween. The choice of costume fails to be innocuous when existing use of gladiatorial imagery has been used by white supremacists such as the *Dream That Was Rome* blogger, combined with the presence of the Proud Boys organisation on January 6th who were photographed using white supremacist hand gestures.<sup>86</sup>

Having detailed several examples of gladiatorial imagery including images and quotes directly lifted from *Gladiator* which have been misappropriated by white supremacists and their associates, I should now explain why *Gladiator II* is already pleasing white supremacists before production has even begun. At the time of writing, casting announcements for the movie have been released piecemeal. Plot details have yet to be released, but the film is purported to be set around two decades after the first, with Lucius, the son of Lucilla, now an adult played by Paul Mescal.

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82 Mediaite (30/09/2020).

83 At the time of writing Trump is the Republican Presidential Candidate for the 2024 election, despite being a convicted felon.

84 Haslam et al. (2023)

85 *The Washington Post* (16/07/2021)

86 *CNN* (11/01/2021).

Casting issues arose quickly with news of the supporting actors. In March 2023, it was announced that Irish actor Barry Keoghan had been cast to play Geta, and in April the American actor Joseph Quinn was cast as his brother Caracalla. In May it was announced that Keoghan would not play Geta due to scheduling conflicts and had been replaced with American actor Fred Hechinger. All three actors are white and conspicuously pale, despite being cast as men with a Syrian mother and a father from what is now Libya. Ridley Scott has never shown much interest in historicity,<sup>87</sup> and yet even a cursory look on Wikipedia would have confirmed that Geta and Caracalla should not be played by pale, white men.<sup>88</sup> Is this casting the result of poor research, or something more deleterious?

Ridley Scott does have a tendency to ‘whitewash’ his movies by casting white actors in inappropriate roles.<sup>89</sup> In 2014 his *Exodus: Gods and Kings* Biblical epic cast Welshman Christian Bale as Moses and Australian Joel Edgerton as Ramses II, with Sigourney Weaver, Aaron Paul, and Tara Fitzgerald in supporting roles. After a public outcry, Scott flippantly defended his choices in a *Variety* profile, saying “I can’t mount a film of this budget [...] and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so—and—so from such—and—such.”<sup>90</sup> Scott has yet to publicly comment on whitewashing the Severan dynasty. The casting is more significant than immediately apparent when combined with the ongoing debate of whether the Roman empire was ethnically diverse and the paranoia of white supremacists concerning their Great Replacement conspiracy theory.<sup>91</sup>

The *Gladiator II* trailer was released on the ninth of July 2024, quickly gaining several hundred thousand views online. On the thirteenth of July, Trump appeared to be injured in an apparent assassination attempt at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania.<sup>92</sup> The event was being broadcast live on American television. Trump was ostensibly shot, and his ear was injured. Within hours, dozens of posts on Twitter compared Trump to a gladiator, with many specifically referencing the 2000 film by adding quotes or images. User @PapiTrumpo posted footage of Trump’s defiant fistpumping in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, edited in black and white slow motion. It is overlaid with music from the *Gladiator* score, namely *Honor Him* composed by Hans Zimmer, which originally accompanied the scene

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87 ‘The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant’ by Kathleen Coleman (2005), who had consulted on the film and refused to be credited when she saw the finished result, is heartily recommended.

88 At the time of writing it is unclear whether the movie will feature their parents, Septimius Severus and Julia Domna.

89 *Variety* (08/10/2015)

90 *Variety* (25/11/2014)

91 Dozier (14/1/2019) and (2019b)

92 *Al Jazeera* (14/07/2024)

in which Maximus' body is removed from the Colosseum following his fatal bout with the Emperor Commodus. Within 48 hours, the tweet received 3.2 million views and more than 95 thousand 'likes.' User @mikenike82 wrote "Donald Trump new nickname for me is Maximus. He is a true gladiator. Also willing to die for what's right and what he believes in a honest government just like maximus I personally have more respect for this man for standing up pumping he's fits letting us know he's okay and feel the strength that this man has was like a lion at the top of the hill roaring so the whole jungle knows who is fuking king" (sic). User @Richard84780383 commended Trump as America's gladiator, bringing back "integrity, honesty, faith and patriotism," and @Patriot9791 claimed that Trump, the "gladiator in the midst of battle," was "struck by his enemy but the hand of God protects him." That the ideology of both the arena and movie have been fundamentally misunderstood by online commentators is plain. The events of the thirteenth of July, so soon after the trailer release, saw a massive uptick in claiming Trump as the modern American Maximus, which had up to this point been occasional and not linked to a specific event. The 2024 presidential election will take place on the fifth of November, mere weeks before the North American release of *Gladiator II*, when promotional material will be ubiquitous. It is likely that this connection between reality and fiction will only strengthen amongst the far-right who were already interested in the film; Trump is on course to become the premier 'gladiator' of choice for American political extremists.

## Conclusion

Though the majority of gladiatorial movies and shows have an admitted trend towards rebellion against corruption, further examination shows that they frequently reinforce conservative ideologies regarding gender roles, race, and violence—as-political-engagement. Hollywood is an ideological state apparatus in America just as the Colosseum functioned in Rome, and it is unclear whether filmmakers are aware of this misuse of their productions.

There are future opportunities to correct these Hollywood habits. The recent *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* and *Dune 2* arena plots showed that with modern CGI, arena combat can be evermore imaginatively and engagingly presented to modern audiences; it is therefore unlikely that Roman-style spectacle is going to fall out of favour soon. At the time of writing multiple gladiatorial films and series are in development: as well as the imminent release of *Gladiator II*, Roland Emmerich is preparing a prestige drama series titled *Those About to Die* starring Anthony Hopkins as Vespasian. A second *Hunger Games* prequel has been announced to depict the second Quarter Quell, and Starz have ordered a *Spartacus* reboot set

in the aftermath of the Servile War. All provide possibilities to present gladiatorial stories that omit the kinds of bigotry that have drawn far-right groups so closely to previous films. In particular, the expansion of gladiatorial spectacle into a myriad of genres should help to excise outdated prejudices from these stories without the danger of losing a sense of historical authenticity, though few have thus succeeded.

As the situation currently stands, gladiatorial imagery online and increasingly in political discourse should be viewed with suspicion given its demonstrated recent use as a far-right dog whistle. Currently the imagery of Leonidas, Thermopylae and *molòn labé* receive the most recognition and attention for their coded messaging, and vital pushback is being made by public historians.<sup>93</sup> The gladiator is fast becoming a popular alternative. In a period of political turmoil and with multiple gladiatorial productions slated for imminent release, the far-right are soon to be handed more ammunition, and public historians will need to be prepared. The damage that cinematic depictions of gladiators have dealt to the public perception of their ancient ideological function is not yet irreparable, but work is to be done to prevent further weaponisation of the misappropriated past.

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93 Such as Devereaux (22/07/2023)

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