

Tony Soprano Caesar
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In this paper I will be showcasing how David Chase expertly contrasted the systems upheld by the Italian mafia in comparison to the ancient Imperial Roman family that came with the reign of Julius Caesar. Using upfront religious imagery of the Catholic tradition commonly held by Italians he showcases many of the morals that were being implanted by the Imperial family that are now commonly present in the Catholic faith. Through the series as we follow the new head of the New Jersey mafia we are being shown many Greco-Roman traditions being used by the Soprano family in the series. Following Tony Soprano's life we are connecting the flow of life that isn't conceivable by the ordinary man; we are shown how there is a divine spirit controlling Tony's everyday life so that each moment connects itself to prominent moments in aspects of his surroundings. David Chase allowed for just a moment to openly compare Tony Soprano to the legendary Julius Caesar allowing our thoughts to wildly explore the overlaying meaning of the show. In the third season during the *Fortunate Son* the Don of New York confronted Tony Soprano about his spell of seizures, comforting him with the words "for Christ's sake Julius Caesar was an epileptic".¹

The beginning of the television series *The Sopranos* begins in a time of transitioning leaders. Our main character Tony Soprano is being looked at as the likely new head of the family. With this introduction to Tony's rule we are being reminded that these are long standing traditions in which our characters will be acting in. In just the third episode we are shown how the mafia operates as a business. A Jewish family comes to Tony's business looking for help. From here they are being paid to essentially physically force a man into doing something he is being resistant against. The essence of the threat is the eventual build up from pain to death being the punishment. Interestingly David Chase chose a Jewish family, the same ethnicity that the Roman Empire had plenty of trouble taming in their time. During the intimidation of their target they cannot get the man to obey. Uniquely with this deal Tony had made a promise in the such to not kill the man they were intimidating, so when his men couldn't force his actions they called Tony for some help. In this scene Tony remarks with immense disgust "you'd really let me kill you wouldn't you". From here the Hasidic Jew

¹A. Hobgood - We are fairly certain Julius Caesar had epilepsy. Famously William Shakespeare in his plays tried to command that Julius Caesar had gained so much control of himself that he could force himself to seizure at will.

immensely brags of his will and brings up when Jewish men laid down their life as to not obey the Roman rule over their God.² In this man's self-pity he asks Tony where the Romans are now: "You're looking at them asshole".

In the first season Tony's wife Carmela is immensely involved with their local Catholic Parish. Through her volunteering and time with the Priest who makes many appearances in the Soprano home we are introduced to the Catholic way of life that the family lives. The Imperial families greatly adored their Classical traditions and religion that brought on the Roman people great success. Rome's first Emperor Augustus Caesar instilled laws of divorce in which he even had to punish his own daughter for.³ What we can find most prominent in the crossover of these pagans with the Empire's future religion of Catholicism is the maintenance of the family unit. These are expressed in *The Sopranos* in both micro and macro terms. Carmela being the homemaker shows the dedication to basic traditions to maintain the family's homeostasis. After their daughter leaves the home for university she calls Tony while he is busy working during a very profitable time for his work and requests he come home to "make sure we don't turn into a family that eats standing up at the counter". While during the extreme macro during the fifth season as Tony and Carmela are temporarily separated: "Well, first of all, we're Italian. We don't believe in divorce. We believe in the nuclear family."

What's most important is the connection with the Institution of the Church as here is where we find more likeness of the Soprano family with that of the Caesars. This juxtaposition is fully realized when you see how their religious beliefs come only second to the cult of the mob. Just as early Roman Emperors were literal soldiers that had the capabilities of committing such deep sins. In the late fifth season Tony's nephew Christopher is having an argument with his fiancée. She is trying to convince him of leaving the entire family because he is grieving about how he currently feels to be treated. He doesn't budge, reminding her simply "I'm a soldier Adriana, when are you gonna understand that?" Who Christopher is a soldier for isn't the current boss Tony as he was one before Tony's era. What he is, is a soldier for the institution that has kept his people safe. This extends beyond who is directly involved in their crimes. As we are shown very late in the series through their Catholic Diocese the mafia

² J Roth, *The Length of the Masada*- I find this an important comparison to bring as it was under the eventual Emperors of Vespasian and Titus in which these attacks were commanded.

³ R Frank, *Augustus' Legislation on Marriage and Children*. Augustus punishes his daughter in his final testament.

organizes festivals for their people, very much in the same way Julius Caesar replenished pagan celebrations in his time. The beginnings of his reforms included building new Churches to replenish their ancient beliefs to implant steady culture. This is again something that David Chase uses as a way to compare the ancient Imperials with the modern mafia. In season 4 the women of the family are at a Church service where an *outsider* talks down of John Gotti and the image this portrays to Italians. The wife of Tony's underboss gets extremely flustered and confronts the Priest about the event afterwards. With a harsh tone she suggested he "think about who really keeps this parish alive year after year."

Now what Christopher has understood is that his actions hold a higher purpose; and even if they did not, it's what he has chosen to believe. This is part of why he is being considered a potential heir to the throne. Reflecting the words of the tenth Emperor of Rome as he rejected the wreath of victory for his efforts in battle "I had only let my arms to God."⁴ Although the Empire would eventually take on Christianity and form the Catholic Church, who these great men in history really believed in were the wanderers of mythology. These wandering heroes all shared many personality traits and lived under the protection of Zeus himself. This privilege often led for these heroes to create a path of redemption to the gods for their crimes and strike justice in the world as their whim created it. Often very severe, where a hero would be the cause of death to someone fairly close to them for seemingly miniscule reasons. The most legendary hero of all Hercules once held a grudge for years over a false promise. When Hercules had won an archery contest for a woman he found that Eurytus was deceitful. Later, Hercules killed him and his city when given the opportunity despite becoming close friends.⁵ This is a common motif in the stories of heroes.⁶ We have this reflection in our hero Tony. Most prominently comes in his actions with one of his captains Ralphie. These two used to have problems, as Tony even said earlier in the season "If he (Ralph) was drowning, I'd throw him a cinder block". They had been bonding over a horse which Ralph had purchased and Tony often cared after. Eventually the stable burned down with their horse Pie-o-my inside. This led Tony to confront Ralph afterwards and in their dialogue it seems as if Ralph may have set the fire on purpose. In rage Tony starts attacking him, eventually killing the man who had killed an innocent creature he cared for.

⁴ Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana, Volume II: Life of Apollonius of Tyana, Book 6

⁵ This is the story of Iole, who was suppose to be the winners concubine, but Eurytus couldn't give her over to Hercules

⁶ Barry Powell, *Classical Mythology* 354

Now Tony often would use the laws of the gods to his favour. Zeus' most important law that he protected over any was the customs of *Xenia*. This roughly translates to "a formal institution of friendship".⁷ This friendship would be marked via the first exchange of presents to each other. He uses this gift-giving in a multitude of different ways. The express purpose is most prominently shown in season 3 when Junior Soprano's doctor is dodging his calls. What Tony does is take his muscle and a gift of a new golf club to doctor Kennedy. When offered Kennedy knows the implicit meaning behind it so he tries to calmly reply "I really can't take it". Tony reminds the doctor how concerned his Uncle is over his treatments and tells him to respect the man, answer his phone calls and not to forget. This bond of connection is also made when Tony was given a business idea through Carmella's cousin. Through an idea of flipping properties in what would not be legal means because of planned corruption Tony gives Brian a watch to thank him. This bond was to tie him in to the game and keep him from being loose lips to the business. From here on out in the show we find Brian spending time even now where the crew would conduct their business. Being given a status within the cult as a friendly outsider.

Finally what we have been shown is how Tony is a modern wanderer, a would be hero in ancient times. We can see the transparency in his being of a hero through the council he often seeks. Many of the early seasons revolve around his meetings with his therapist Dr. Melfie. Even the Emperor Titus we spoke of earlier would bring his diviners on missions to interpret messages of the gods. Tony had many wiser men he often would look to for advice as well. Heroes used to have an official oracle from Apollo, gone from the modern world. Which would be why he attempted to gift Dr. Melfie extra money in *The Telltale Moozadell*. He said this was because of the extra progress this week and left before she could return the extra payment. Although she starkly rejects the next time Tony tries to pay for sessions as a way to reject the gift. As Dr. Melfie is already there to be help to understanding the complexities of his life and the meanings involved in each situation. Often revealing how the world spun for him, and how it was best to react. A therapist he only saw because of his panic attacks causing him to faint. A necessary trait for our heroes, as they are forced to overcome to grow stronger.\

⁷ Barry Powell, *Classical Mythology* 138

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