JONATHAN SACHS


Reviewed by Norman Vance

Dead languages and the classical past can still shape living literature. Shelley claimed in 1821 that “We are all Greeks.” But Jonathan Sachs argues that for Shelley’s generation and the era of the French Revolution the moral and cultural legacy of Rome, particularly republican Rome, was just as important. This stimulating book in the Oxford “Classical Presences” series is a useful contribution to classical reception studies, which in recent years have rescued classical antiquity from exemplary but recondite technical scholarship and comparative neglect. The afterglow of the glory that was Greece, a heritage claimed and saluted not just by Shelley but by Byron and Poe, has been explored in Richard Jenkyns’s The Victorians and Ancient Greece (1980) and Frank Turner’s The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain (1981). The public legacy of the grandeur that was Rome has drawn less attention, though W.L. Vance’s America’s Rome (1989) and Margaret Malamud’s recent Ancient Rome and Modern America (2009), both illustrated to emphasise visual appropriations, indicate some of the possibilities. Here, instead of dwelling on statues or noble buildings or considering the specific influence of Cicero, Tacitus, or Virgil, Sachs rereads some of the prose, poetry, fiction and drama of the romantic and revolutionary era for evidences of the presence of Rome, whether as ideal republic, source of moral exemplars, or repository of reusable literary forms and attitudes.
Like Caesar’s Gaul, this book is divided into three parts, and Part I highlights “Political Writing and the Novel.” This means in practice Edmund Burke, William Godwin and the Jacobin novel, though there are some interesting sidelights, such as the radical John Thelwall’s unpublished but clamorously controversial lectures of 1796 on republican Rome, reinterpreted to emphasise the cause of Liberty and abuses of aristocratic power. Burke, unsurprisingly, steals the show. Sachs rightly stresses the extent to which the author of Reflections on the Revolution in France seeks to align himself with Cicero, another statesman who regarded himself as the saviour of the state. But he reads the sense of connection a little too narrowly, claiming that “Burke hardly cites Cicero at all in his earlier work” (61). This is to ignore Burke’s sustained campaign against Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of British India. Casting Hastings in the role of Verres, the rapaciously corrupt governor of Sicily, whom Cicero successfully prosecuted, Burke took the role of Cicero for himself. Also, Sachs’s focus on the specific politics of the revolution controversy tends to miss the frequency with which--as man of letters, lawyer and politician--Burke identified with Cicero throughout a long career: when he came to write Reflections in his old age he found himself quoting Cicero’s reflections on old age in De Senectute.

Turning from Burke to Godwin, Sachs explores a different way of appropriating the matter of Rome: using it on behalf of more radical politics. Godwin, discussed as an educational as well as a political writer, seems to suit Sachs’s project beautifully because he cautions against a purely belleletrist approach to the classics that dwells on the sublimities of Virgil or the elegance of Horace. Instead, as Sachs observes, he stresses the moral value of studying ancient history, of learning about the “‘simplicity and rectitude of manners of the first Greeks and Romans’” (69).
This draws attention to one of the problems presented by Sachs’s material: the Greeks keep intruding, particularly in Part II, “Poetry.” While republican Rome had a distinctive history, its culture was intimately bound up with that of Greece and it is not always easy to identify a specifically Roman strand within romantic classicising. Keats died in Rome but Greece claimed his imagination. Byron’s contemplation of the ruin of Rome in *Childe Harold* prompts reflection on the ruins of Greece and “perish’d states” more generally (136). Godwin insists that “from the Greek and Roman authors the moderns learned to think” (7), and the early Shelley attacks Greek and Roman culture and institutions indiscriminately for promoting honor and glory at the expense of virtue (147). But Sachs argues that Godwin’s classicism is not undifferentiated, that he is particularly sympathetic to the Latin language and to Roman history and Roman virtue. Sachs also claims that while the later Shelley had become a passionate admirer of Greece, he uses Rome and its complex political relations with Greece—which included diffusing Greek influence across the known world—as a way of commenting on the reactionary politics of England after Waterloo.

All this is true and helpful. But the problem does not go away. Sachs identifies a Plutarchian strand in the Jacobin novels of Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, Elizabeth Inchbald and others, even when classical learning comes in for criticism as exclusive and impractical. He notes, for example, that in Mary Hays’s *Emma Courtney* (1796), the heroine is made to read Plutarch as Rousseau had done. But Plutarch wrote in Greek, and his heroes are Greek as well as Roman. Sachs succeeds in demonstrating that the Jacobin novel reworks classical history with Plutarchian exemplary individuals, but the Plutarchian emphasis on moral character, vice or virtue rather than specific politics or the details of battle, is in a sense transhistorical and transcultural. This makes it easy to annex Plutarch and Graeco-Roman culture for a
Jacobin novel or a Shakespeare play, but it takes us quite a long way from the lived realities of the Roman experience. In such cases, is it really Rome itself that is haunting the literary imagination?

Part III, on “Drama”, credits Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, much more than Julius Caesar, with keeping the image of Rome on the British Romantic stage and prompting reflection on the nature and uses of political power at a time of popular unrest. In an era of actors’ theatre it mattered enormously who was playing the title role. John Philip Kemble’s sternly aristocratic Coriolanus, depicted in the somber 1798 portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence that is reproduced on the cover of the book, held the stage from 1789 to 1817. Among other things, this prompted the radical William Hazlitt’s controversial reading of the play which attributed to Shakespeare imaginative complicity in authoritarian politics.

In a rare but unfortunate lapse, Sachs attributes Handel’s stirring “See the conquering hero comes,” used in Kemble’s production of Coriolanus, to the opera Julius Caesar instead of to the 1747 oratorio Judas Maccabaeus (200). There is indeed an early tragi-comic Handelian opera entitled Giulio Cesare in Egitto (1724), and the slip would not matter very much except that Sachs tries to build on it a more general claim: that a play about republican Rome could absorb material about the first of the Caesars, the dictator who made the republic collapse. On stage and off, the reimagining of early Roman virtue was indeed complicated and confused by the imperialism of the popular image of Rome: a ruined city revealed by archaeology and the engravings of Piranesi and Pannini. But Judas Maccabaeus was a Jewish rather than a Roman hero. So was Samson, subject of another even more enduringly popular oratorio by Handel first performed in 1743, with a libretto derived from Milton’s Samson Agonistes and, ultimately, the Old Testament. On the representatation of
character and moral heroism in the romantic era, therefore, it could be argued that Handel, scripture and perhaps Dryden’s heroic tragedies – not all of them classical - had at least as much influence as Plutarch or republican Rome.

In the romantic period and after, the main Roman source of exemplary history was not so much Plutarch as the early books of Livy, describing the unsatisfactory Roman monarchy and its replacement with a republic. John Howard Payne’s *Brutus* (1818), with Edmund Kean in the title role, was a kind of answer to Kemble’s haughty Coriolanus, contemptuous of the people. Payne drew on Livy to put rebellion, regicide and the dawn of a republic into some kind of historical perspective in the years just after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Sachs is particularly good on the political ambiguities of the play. While it could be seen as cautiously conservative, implying that there were dangers in replacing even an apparently corrupt monarchy with a republic, its rhetorical endorsement of freedom, liberty and equality (only fraternité seems to be missing) complicates the picture, which is complicated again by the association of freedom and liberty with revenge and bloodshed.

Sachs finds a similar ambivalence in another play drawn from Livy and early Roman history, Sheridan Knowles’s *Caius Gracchus* (1823). On the one hand, it seems to condemn the corrupt patrician dominance of Rome’s legal and political system, but on the other hand, its downtrodden populace proves venal, violent and lacking any kind of coherent political vision. Caius Gracchus is a defeated hero let down by the very people he tries to help. Any dramatic representation of popular disturbance and demand for land reform was going to be controversial in the England of the 1820s, when the Corn Laws favouring the landed interest but increasing the price of food were a focus for radical discontent, and Sachs provides interesting
details on cuts imposed by the censor, excising the more dramatic examples of the
language of class conflict and populist rhetoric.

These plays are historically interesting, as is George Croly’s anti-democratic
Catiline, never actually performed although a rewritten version by H.M. Milner was
produced in 1827. But they are not great literature, and even in their own day they
met with a rather mixed reception. It is unfortunate that Sachs’s dates are political
rather than literary, from the French Revolution to the first Reform Bill, for that
excludes consideration of the work of Thomas Babington Macauley. Born in 1800,
just five years after Keats, this classically-educated, late-romantic essayist, historian,
and balladist produced – in his Lays of Ancient Rome (1842) -- a far more memorable,
successful and influential tribute to early Roman virtue and heroism than anything
from the pen of Payne or Knowles.

But it is not quite fair to see 1832 as a purely political date. In that year, as
Sachs notes in his Conclusion, Thomas De Quincey published the first of his
extraordinary essays on the Caesars in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. Against
his more radical contemporaries and predecessors, De Quincey argues that Rome lost
neither greatness nor liberty under Julius Caesar and that it was imperial rather than
republican Rome that achieved true greatness, consolidated power, and strength.
What would imperial Britain make of the richly ambiguous history of imperial Rome,
magnificent, bloodstained, ending in decline and fall? That belongs to the next
chapter in the long history of the equivocal legacy of Rome, culminating in works
such as Charles Lucas’s Greater Rome and Greater Britain (1912). The story of
Rome’s British afterlife did not end in 1832 any more than it began in 1789, but Sachs
has recounted an important episode of it, giving us a vivid sense of how it operated in
the Romantic era.
Norman Vance is Professor of English at the University of Sussex. His books include *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997) and *Irish Literature since 1800* (2002).