

Review: Laura Eastlake, *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 247pp. ISBN 978-0-19-883303-1, £65.00.

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THE RENAISSANCE POET Petrarch once asked if all history was not merely praise of Rome. Certainly, from the fifth century C.E. to the nineteenth century, classical Rome never left the cultural and political imagination, remaining ever-present throughout the medieval, early modern and eighteenth-century periods as a potent historical model, sometimes to be emulated, sometimes avoided. By the opening of the Victorian era, however, Thomas Carlyle, writing in chapter eight of *Chartism* (1839), could remark that '[t]he stream of World History has altered its complexion; the Romans are dead out, [and the] English are come in'. Although many contemporaries shared his belief that Britain's unprecedented industrial progress and colonial expansion since Waterloo had set them apart in history, some felt that far from superseding the Romans, they were becoming them.

The prevalence and importance of classical culture in Victorian society has long been recognised, though its study has been the victim of a continued imbalance. This is because arguably far more scholarly attention has been paid to the nineteenth-century reception of ancient Greece than Rome, and to how antiquity was understood by members of the Victorian social elite than the middle or lower classes. A number of studies have sought to address this disparity, such as Norman Vance's *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997) and Sarah J. Butler's *Britain and its Empire in the Shadow of Rome* (2012), but much remains to be done to present in true perspective the relationship between classical Rome and Victorian Britain, especially in its vital interactions with class and gender.

Part of Oxford University Press's *Classical Presences* series, Laura Eastlake's *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* seeks to define Rome's influence on visions of male identity during the nineteenth century. The central purpose of her study is to explore the multiple, competing visions of Rome that were drawn upon during the Victorian era, which she argues were often contested because the forms of masculinity that they sought to support were just as disputed themselves. Throughout, she emphasises the adaptability of ancient Rome as a model for contemporary masculinity,

highlighting its often-contradictory uses 'from Waterloo to Wilde'.¹ In doing so, she portrays how Rome was appropriated across the full spectrum of Victorian masculinity, from the vigorous pluck of imperial manhood to the languid posturing of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete.

Developed from her doctoral research, Eastlake's monograph is divided into four parts of two chapters apiece, covering her main thesis in the context of classical education, British political reform, the British Empire, and the Aesthetic/Decadent movements. She argues that classical Rome represented a complex object of reception and usage for Britons throughout the nineteenth century, as well as a site of cultural conflict for its various forms of masculinity. In doing so, Eastlake covers an eclectic range of topics, from children's fiction to colonial history, from *Punch* cartoons to 'swords-and-sandals' novels, which together embody what she terms the 'constellation of complex, contradictory and continuously evolving receptions of Rome'.²

The first part of the monograph, 'Classical Education and Manliness in the Nineteenth Century', summarises the culture and practices that saw the study of Latin, Greek and ancient history represent the preferred form of educating boys throughout the Victorian era, especially among Britain's social elite. It then takes three well-known examples of schoolboy fiction, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), F.W. Farrar's *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858) and Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* (1899), subjecting their narratives to close analysis and focussing upon their idealising of the 'Man of Letters' as a counterpoint to the imperial warrior.

The second part, 'Political Masculinity in the Age of Reform', starts by examining the crucial period from Waterloo to the Reform Act, when Britain wrestled with reclaiming classical Rome from its recent Napoleonic appropriation, while reorganising the country's political structure. It then skips ahead to the 1870s to analyse the reception of the opposing political poles of Caesar and Cicero in the works of Anthony Trollope, showing how these Roman perspectives shaped his beliefs about what a contemporary public man should be.

The third part, 'Imperial Manliness', investigates two specific case studies in order to illuminate the connection between ancient Rome and colonial masculinity. In the first, Wilkie Collins's novel *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome* (1850) is considered in the

¹ Laura Eastlake, *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

context of liberal imperialism, colonial advance, and 'the rise of the imperial father'.³ The second examines the figure of Cleopatra and the later-Victorian 'New Imperialist', showing how, as the British Empire became increasingly Caesarist in its ambitions, Egypt became perceived as a potentially 'feminine' colonial conquest.

The fourth part, 'Decadent Rome and Imperial Masculinity', begins by examining London as a locus of potential corruption for Britain's imperial society, showing how metropolitan degeneration was alleged by many commentators in the later Victorian era with reference to ancient Rome. It then turns to the late-Victorian Aesthetic and Decadent movements, where Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde are examined in the context of their positive aesthetic appropriations of Roman decline, with a specific focus upon their reception of the Emperor Nero.

As Yopie Prins and Isobel Hurst have shown in the case of female Victorian receptions of ancient Greece, understanding how classics was gendered in different ways in this period represents a fruitful area of current scholarship. *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* is a valuable addition to the study of nineteenth-century classical reception, offering a new perspective on how Victorian men of various types perceived their masculinity through the lens of Roman history and literature. Fluently written (and complemented with nine black-and-white illustrations), Eastlake's argument is credible and her conclusions sound, with arguably the finest feature of her study being her close textual analysis of such an eclectic range of contemporary literary works.

That said, a number of criticisms may be raised. Most conspicuously, the study deals with its subject chiefly in regard to the Victorian social and literary elite, rather than the middle or lower classes. Much of this concentration owes to the greater quantity of sources surviving from this former group, but other scholars have shown the insights that alternative visual and performative sources are capable of providing for understanding culture-wide classical reception. (For instance, Edith Hall and Henry Stead's forthcoming book *A People's History of Classics* promises a great deal in this regard.) Consequently, Eastlake's study exhibits what might be termed a zoetropic view of its subject, rather than a panoramic one, presenting detailed, often colourful and vivid flashes of interest, but without giving the reader a sense of the full picture.

There are also a number of omissions. For example, there is no mention of *virtus*, a key component of Roman male behaviour in the public sphere highly relevant to the

³ Ibid., p. 111.

author's discussion of Victorian forms of political masculinity. Similarly, the vital importance of *Altertumswissenschaft* (the 'science of antiquity') on Victorian classical reception goes ignored. Apart from references to 'muscular Christianity', there is no extended discussion of the interaction of religion with contemporary masculinity, despite its vital importance to Victorians. In particular, Catholic Rome was often perceived in gendered terms as a more effeminate, superstitious alternative to manly, sober Protestantism. Related to this, popular travel to Italy, too, is overlooked, despite representing one of the most potent material forms of Victorian interface with Rome as a place and as a concept.

The monograph would also have benefitted from reference to the work of a number of scholars. For instance, C.A. Hagerman's *Britain's Imperial Muse* (2013) and Phiroze Vasunia's *The Classics and Colonial India* (2013) would have added much to Eastlake's discussions of the links between classics and empire. Additionally, considering its central analysis of gender, the volume could have explored in greater depth the connections between its subject and male sexuality, which goes largely unexamined apart from a few remarks.⁴ Nor, despite discussion of Pater and Wilde, is there any mention of 'queer' classical reception.

There are few, if any, textual errors, but one or two factual inaccuracies have crept in. For example, Egypt was never a formal 'imperial acquisition' for Britain in the period under discussion in the third part of the book; from 1882 to 1914, it remained a *de facto* possession in which London exercised merely indirect jurisdiction.⁵ Only with the declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire in 1914 was Egypt transformed into a formal protectorate, which lasted until 1922.

Nevertheless, these criticisms aside, Laura Eastlake has produced an admirable and engaging overview of the connections between ancient Rome and Victorian masculinity, which will be of value to students and scholars of nineteenth-century culture, gender and literature. Incarnations of classical Rome in Victorian society were manifold and protean, which makes them challenging to recover in their entirety. This process is further complicated by the dearth of evidence to inform middle- and lower-class receptions, as well as the difficulty of drawing conclusions that apply across the strict class and gender divides of Victorian society. Taking these issues into

⁴ Ibid., p. 139 & 142.

⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

consideration, Eastlake has managed to illuminate clearly, if not wholly, some of the vital links between ancient and modern in Victorian masculinity, showing how things were rarely simple, even in a man's world.



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