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Towards a Cultural Sociology of the Uses of Classical Literature: Deploying Literary Representations of Rome and the Romans in England between the 15th and 18th Centuries

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ABSTRACT

Studies of receptions of ancient Greek and Roman literature analyze how so-called ‘classical’ texts are variously taken up and deployed by persons existing at later points in history. So far, the nature of such reception has not been conceptualized in an explicitly sociological manner. This paper proposes one way to do that, drawing upon key ideas developed by the Yale School of Cultural Sociology. This is done in order to re-narrate the ways in which ancient Roman texts were used by various interested parties in England, and later the United Kingdom, between the 15th and 18th centuries. The paper shows how Italian humanist understandings of the classicality of ancient Roman texts were taken up by English humanists, thereby purifying the overall set of such texts, rendering them seemingly context-free and adaptable to changing social circumstances. The relatively autonomous and free-floating nature of Roman literary texts defined as ‘classical’ allowed them to be taken up in different ways at different times for different purposes by different sorts of actors, especially aristocratic ones or those closely associated with aristocratic viewpoints. Texts describing republican Rome, and those depicting the transition from that political condition to the emergence of the Roman empire, were particularly appealing to English exegetes in the 17th and 18th centuries. They were deployed to make sense of the English Civil War and its aftermath, to carve out variant political identities, and to reflect upon the rise of the British Empire, which was understood to have surpassed its Roman counterpart, at the same time as it was feared that it might succumb eventually to a similar demise. The hopes and fears of English elites, as these were woven into the creation of political identities, were worked out through reflection upon and deployment of Roman texts taken to be timeless, processes that the paper models in a distinctive cultural sociological fashion.

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1. Introduction

... I could never read a passage in Polybius, another in Cicero, to this purpose, without a secret Pleasure in applying it to the English Constitution, which it suits much better than the Roman ...^[1]

The field of classical reception studies has emerged over the last two decades or so as a vibrant interdisciplinary area of study. It is concerned with how ancient Greek and Roman texts, images, and other symbolic materials were appropriated in subsequent centuries by different sorts of actors, especially but not only in the British and American contexts. Such reception studies examine how Greek and Roman materials have been variously translated, transmitted, interpreted, represented, and reworked over the centuries^[2,3].

This scholarly field operates at two levels simultaneously. In the first instance, it has led to investigations that have broadened and deepened understandings of: how receptions of classical texts have been influenced by various social factors, such as how social class has impinged on how particular texts and translations thereof have been created and interpreted^[4]; how certain kinds of imagery can have very long histories that are semi-autonomous of the social conditions of their representation and reproduction^[5]; how textual materials from the ancient world have been deployed in, and came to be constitutive of, systems of school and university education, especially but not only for social elites over the last several hundred years^[6], and how elite actors deployed ancient texts and archaeological findings to claim legitimacy for themselves as both historical inheritors of, and contemporary standard-bearers for, the glories of antique civilizations^[7].

In the second place, a focus on how classical texts have been variously received in different social contexts is one way in which the older discipline of classical studies has mutated, coming to grips with allegations of elitism, and complacency in the light of critiques of the elite (if not elitist) and Eurocentric social basis of its traditional scholarly apparatus^[8].

As a result, the burgeoning domain of classical reception studies has been a collective endeavour to make the study of ancient Greek and Roman literature more socially grounded, as well as more valid and contemporaneous. At the same time, the social basis of reception, translation, and related processes have been laid out by scholars who are specialists in the study of classical literature, and of the broader classical tradition in painting, architecture, and so on. Yet an obvious move in this regard has not yet been made.

The academic discipline pre-eminently associated with

understanding cultural matters in relation to social phenomena, dynamics, and trends is sociology. That is also a discipline deeply engaged with understanding its own social conditions of possibility, for example, the relative amounts of privilege required to carry out scholarship at all^[9]. Sociological vocabularies have, to our knowledge, not been systematically developed for, and applied to, the kinds of materials that classical reception studies are typically concerned with.

It is the purpose of this paper to take some material that may be familiar to scholars of classical literature, but to narrate the social significance of processes of reception in a systematic sociological manner. This is a task that could possibly be done using various different kinds of sociological vocabulary. One kind of sociological theoretical framework that is particularly conducive to setting out a way of narrating the reception of classical literature is the school of thought known as ‘cultural sociology’. This is an analytical position that has been developed by a set of scholars who have been based particularly at Yale University^[10].

In this paper, we appropriate some concepts taken from that school of thought and use them to retell the story of how certain kinds of Roman literature were put to work by different kinds of social actors in the English context between the 15th and 18th centuries. Our aim in doing this is to show how one kind of sociological language can be used to tease out, in a more precise way than may hitherto be the case, some of the social dynamics whereby Roman literature came to be so constitutive of English politics and identities, especially elite ones.

Consider the quotation offered above. It is from a letter to *The Spectator* magazine, published in 1712 by the Whig essayist and Member of Parliament, Joseph Addison. The significance of Addison’s remarks and the comparison he draws both extend beyond their immediate referents—the political constitutions of contemporary England and ancient republican Rome respectively. They capture the importance of Roman civilization more broadly for understanding and evaluating the state and status of English polity, society and civilization. They are part of a much wider tradition of using ancient Rome to ‘think England’. This was done through a long series of deployments of ancient Roman texts by intellectual producers of various types and political persuasions. How they did this, why, and with which results across several centuries of early modernity, comprise the empirical focus of this paper.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first place, we set out the theoretical vocabulary taken from Yale School cultural sociology that we will use to understand the empirical material. Second, we will show how a whole cor-

pus of ancient Roman texts was purified and autonomized, first by Italian humanists, and then by their counterparts in England. This allowed for these texts to become relatively free-floating resources that could be deployed over time by different sorts of persons for different types of reasons in successive social contexts. We then proceed to demonstrate how appropriations of such texts worked at various points through the period spanning the 15th to 18th centuries. We especially focus on two substantive areas. First, how textual representations of republican Rome were put to work to deal with what can be construed as the ‘cultural trauma’ of the English Civil War. Second, how representations of imperial Rome were used to understand the rise of the British empire, as well as its possible eventual supersession due to the vicissitudes of time.

2. Putting Cultural Sociology to Work

In contradistinction to many other sorts of sociological analysis of cultural matters, which tend to regard cultural forms and forces as products of allegedly more elemental entities such as social structures or socio-economic formations, Yale School cultural sociology asserts the analytical autonomy, and partial empirical autonomy, of cultural phenomena in relation to social, political, and economic entities^[10].

Understood in this way, cultural systems of thought, imagery, and symbolism are seen to have certain sorts of causal power: They can affect and shape how people act and how social patterns are made and re-made over time. These cultural systems are above all meaningful. They create universes of meaning that can inform, often deeply, how people think and act, and thus how the social world is made and re-made^[11].

Drawing on the original insights of the early 20th century sociology of Émile Durkheim^[12], Yale School cultural sociology sees these systems as sets of ‘collective classifications’, ways of dividing the world up into dyadic opposites. Such oppositions include sacred versus profane, good versus bad, pure versus polluted, and suchlike. A particular set of collective classifications processes the world in its own terms, defining certain persons and entities as being on one or other side of the major classificatory divisions^[10,13].

Such cultural classificatory systems may persist over decades, centuries, or even millennia. Their persistence and internal mutation over time inevitably depend on a range of wider social circumstances^[14]. Nonetheless, they are seen to be always relatively autonomous of those circumstances and irreducible to them. Whether a given cultural system is more, or less, autonomous of broader social, political, and economic circumstances depends

on the case at hand, as the precise level of autonomy is an issue that has to be investigated empirically. How a particularly autonomous cultural system came to be so autonomous under and across certain circumstances must be understood by ascertaining which sorts of persons and which sorts of actions rendered it so^[14].

How such a system came to enjoy particularly high and ongoing levels of autonomy from specific societal circumstances can be a result of processes of ‘purification’, whereby groups of persons succeed over time, whether that was their conscious aim or not, in rendering the cultural system as an apparently timeless one, enjoying the privileged status of ‘classicality’, enjoying authority and legitimacy across expanses of time^[10].

This form of cultural sociology also holds that people may act by explicitly appealing to certain values embodied in such cultural systems and may use those values to make claims about how the world is and should be. That is, persons may actively draw upon the classifications and so classify particular entities in the world as either sacred or profane, as pure or polluted, and so on. Sets of cultural classifications are thereby put to work and made to apply in new social circumstances by persons who act within and upon those circumstances^[12].

The same set of cultural classifications might be put to work in one way by some persons at one time, and then put to very different uses by other people operating at a later time. Whether the earlier uses have any effects on the later uses is an empirical issue. It depends on whether the salience of the earlier uses is, or is not, passed on to later generations, by processes of collective memory construction and dissemination^[15].

A general historical tendency is that, if a particular cultural system is especially autonomous of social circumstances, and enjoys particular legitimacy and salience over time, then later uses of it may not be much influenced by earlier deployments, if indeed they are at all. This is because it is so powerful and prestigious in the minds of those that appeal to it, that it is (what is taken to be) the system *itself* that is so important, and not any specific earlier uses of it. Those earlier uses may not be known at all, or may be known but thought to be unimportant, especially in the face of the great and forceful nature of the system itself^[15]. In such cases, the analyst can discern a series of ‘breaks’ in how across time people appeal to and make use of a given cultural system. How persons at time X made use of it to classify the world and thus to act upon it, may bear little or no correspondence to how people at the later time Y did so.

We can now say more precisely why we feel that Yale School cultural sociology is particularly germane to clas-

sical reception studies. This is because the theory's analytical emphases fit particularly closely with the unfolding of certain historical circumstances, and thereby are particularly well suited to illuminating those circumstances in a precisely specified manner. Classical reception studies in large part are concerned with how ancient Roman literature, both fictional and non-fictional, was put to use in England by various interested parties over the centuries. In our view, literature and the complex of symbols and ideas embodied in and surrounding it, was a cultural system collectively classified as being endowed with classicality. It became in the early modern period strongly autonomous of wider societal circumstances through meaningful processes of purification and legitimation.

Ancient Roman texts and their surrounding symbolic universe were rendered as 'classical', that is as timeless and authoritative, and authoritative precisely because they were timeless. They came to be seen by persons familiar with them as very powerful grounds for making one's own arguments about how the world should be understood, and about how things currently are and how they should be. The ongoing profundity of the perception that the Roman-classical cultural system floated free of *all* specific circumstances was precisely the underlying and persistent reason why over long periods of time it could be selectively drawn upon and deployed in *any* circumstances.

This situation also explains why later uses of the system generally bore little relation to earlier uses. The timeless 'classicality' of Roman texts and their symbolisms protected them from any sense that they had already been used up and exhausted by earlier generations and their tendentious appropriations of them. Rather, Roman texts were widely regarded as—to put the point in a 21st century vernacular register—gifts that could keep on giving. They were understood as endlessly bounteous storehouses of wise insights and telling analogies, to be pulled on for the purpose of understanding the present day in deeper senses than otherwise would be possible. What was seen as the Roman-classical tradition was defined as an inexhaustible intellectual resource. Its apparently context-free nature meant that it could be put to use in any new social circumstances that might arise, for example, in the deeply dislocating conditions of the period immediately after the English Civil War, or the more peaceable circumstances of the 18th century. The Roman-classical literary corpus came to possess a contextless quality and that meant that later generations could more or less ignore the appropriations of it by earlier generations, if they were even aware of those at all. Thus, the kinds of uses that 18th century people put the Roman-classical cultural corpus to, bear hardly any resemblance to, or traces of, deployments of it

during the English civil war period.

One more specific Yale School thematic we also draw upon here rests in the notion of 'cultural trauma'. The concept seeks to cast light on the ways actors try to make sense of negative situations and events that fundamentally call into question the collective identity shared by the members of a group. Alexander^[10] defines cultural trauma as an event that 'leaves indelible marks on the group consciousness', in such a way that marks group members 'memories forever' at the same time as 'changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways'. This does not, however, happen automatically. Certain terrible events need not necessarily have culturally traumatic consequences. Whether they do or not depends on whether certain socially influential persons can successfully construct and represent the events as indeed truly traumatic for the group that they claim to speak on behalf of^[10].

The consequences that follow in the wake of such narrations of group trauma occur in open-ended yet socially patterned ways, and how certain audiences respond to them depends on a range of circumstantial conditions^[10]. The group(s) in question may over time cohere together in the face of perceived group torment, in ways that enable future collective identities to be formed^[16], or they may fracture into contending and conflictual factions^[17,18]. We use the cultural trauma thematic to understand how certain elite persons used textual representations of republican Rome for the purposes of remaking social and political order in the wake of the regicide of King Charles I and the accompanying civil war that tore England apart.

3. The Autonomization and Purification of Roman-Classical Texts

In this section, we consider how the Roman-classical corpus of texts was created and made culturally highly autonomous through various cultural purification processes.

These must be understood against the background of earlier processes that happened not in England but in Italy. Such developments were afoot among, and because of, the activities of the loosely connected set of scholars who throughout the later 15th century and into the 16th century promoted novel 'humanist' perspectives on the nature of existence^[19].

The Italian humanists 'deliberately challenged—and sometimes misrepresented—the intellectual and institutional supremacy of scholastic theology', the previously dominant intellectual constellation in Western Europe, with the aim of radically reconfiguring 'how the world and its history was viewed'^[19]. In the humanist worldview, the high point of Western civilization lay in the classical Greek and Roman past. As such, 'progress' was not some-

thing that would arrive with the passing of time. Rather, for progress to be achieved and for history to advance, it was necessary to confront the future in dialogue with the ancient past ^[20].

In making such claims, the humanists, like other intellectuals in other times and places, created multi-layered narratives about how things were, are, and will be, encompassing evaluative judgements and conceptual distinctions, asserting that certain phenomena were great and good, while other things were worthless and to be despised and shunned ^[10]. Despite differences of emphasis between individual authors, we may say that Italian humanism yielded a flexible and appealing ‘metalanguage that instructed people how to live’, especially how to live in better ways than before ^[10].

In Italian humanist narratives, the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome were sacred and pure. While the rest of the known world was languishing in a state of barbarism, the citizens of ancient Greece and Rome had attained a level of civilization the like of which had never been seen before, or since. By contrast, northern European peoples and cultures were profane and vulgar, both in the past and in the present. The cultural division that set up (Mediterranean) civilization in opposition to (Northern) barbarism generated specific conceptions of people, the forms of association binding them, and the relations that were held between ‘citizens’ and the ‘state’ ^[21-24].

The humanist understanding of civility—defined to be characteristic of the kind of life produced by Greek and Roman civilizations—emphasised ‘society’ over the ‘self’; associated ‘virtue’ with ‘self-restraint’; put together ‘self-edification’ with ‘education’; and equated the ‘state’ with ‘patriotism’ and ‘service’. The discursive construction of ‘barbarism’, involving both the absence of and hostility to civility, set up the antitheses of such ideals, involving such negative states of affairs as individuals’ and groups’ unfortunate proximity to bestial ‘Nature’; rootedness in a ‘primordial state’ that lacked ‘culture’ and ‘education’; a tendency towards violent and unpredictable ‘volatility’ and ‘excess’, rather than ‘self-restraint’ and ‘control’; and dynamics of unruly ‘tribalism’ tending towards entropic ‘disorder’, as opposed to the well-functioning social integration characteristic of the types of formal political organisation involved in civilized Greek and Roman polities ^[19].

In seeking to bring back to tangible and living existence the systems of thought and values which they thought ancient Graeco-Roman civilization had been built upon, the Italian humanists claimed to have unearthed a body of literary works that espoused those ideas and orientations, and in that sense were timeless ^[21]. They deployed those

classical texts to try to orientate the present towards a specific vision of the future. This was one that was alleged to be capable of going beyond even the awe-inspiring achievements of what was taken as the ‘classical past’. To this way of thinking, to be ‘modern’ was to confront the future in constructive dialogue with the ancient past. Thus, in a rather paradoxical manner, the way to construct a more civilized future was to pay serious attention to very old books and other writings. These were not the texts that constituted the Bible of Christianity, the major reference point of people in medieval Europe, but rather the works of the ancient pagan authors of Greece and Rome ^[19].

How Italian humanism was taken up in other western European countries during the second half of the 15th century is a complex matter. Still, we may say that in the English context, the indigenization process was a collective effort spanning some six decades or so ^[23,25-27].

It is possible to claim that ‘the English Renaissance began when Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey discovered, translated and imitated the work of Petrarch’, influencing greatly the work of poets writing in English for the next several centuries ^[26]. But from our point of view, the process of the appropriation of Italian humanism in English is more directly driven by its uptake among scholars at the University of Oxford. One central figure was the Duke of Gloucester, whose patronage and enthusiasm for the ‘new Italian learning’ inspired subsequent generations of Oxonians to set off for the universities of Padua and Bologna ^[23]. Following the Duke’s death in 1447, the task of importing Italian humanism from Italy back to Oxford was taken up by subsequent generations of Oxonians, most notably Thomas Linacre (1460-1520), William Grocyn (1446-1519), and William Latimer (1467-1545).

Benefitting directly from the duke’s legacy, these three men travelled to Italian universities to learn from those humanist scholars considered eminent in the areas of philosophy, natural science, medicine, law, and Greek. Linacre travelled to Bologna in 1488 ^[23]. While in Florence, he was tutored by Politian in the classics, learned Greek, and attended the court of Lorenzo de’Medici. From Florence, Linacre went to Rome to further his study of the work of Plato. Graduating in medicine at the University of Padua, Linacre then spent time at Vicenza to further his study of medicine ^[25]. On his return to Oxford, Linacre passed on his enthusiasm for, and deep knowledge of, Italian humanism to others, including Thomas More and John Colet. Erasmus of Rotterdam referred to Linacre as the ‘introducer of medical science in England’, a reputation that led to him succeeding the Italian Battista de Boeria as court physician during the reign of Henry VIII ^[23].

Previously a fellow of New College, William Grocyn,

travelled to Florence. On his return to Oxford in 1490, Grocyn is believed to have been the first teacher of Greek in England (Allen, 1903). Travelling to Italy at the age of forty, William Latimer is reckoned to have been in Italy during the years 1498 to 1505 ^[24,25]. On arriving there, he studied the Greek classics and corresponded with Erasmus. Following his return to England, Latimer was installed as a Master of Arts at Oxford in 1513.

At the University of Cambridge, John Colet and John Fisher were similarly influential scholarly figures imbued in the humanist ways ^[27]. Although executed in 1535 for failing to recognise Henry VIII's appointment as head of the Church of England, Fisher was a key figure in bringing humanism to Cambridge, together with one of its arch-proponents internationally, Erasmus of Rotterdam, who resided in the university in the early 1510s.

With humanist discourse firmly enconced in both of England's two major seats of learning, it could then pass out from the intellectual sphere to the royal court, and then, via reforms in secondary education, into the wider culture ^[22,28]. This is not surprising. In a period characterised by the deep inter penetration of universities, the Church, and the royal court, many of the scholarly men influenced by humanism were also courtiers and churchmen, often high-ranking and important in these spheres ^[29].

The core of English society was that nexus of persons and relations between them that bound the royal court with the (Catholic) Church. It was within that connective interface that sacred and secular forms of power were concentrated and co-constituted. The infiltration of humanism into the royal court operated in various overlapping ways.

Following the accession to the throne of Henry VII in 1485, the practice of importing Italian courtiers to England on account of their exemplary reputation as civilized, and civilizing, personages began. This set the context in which humanism entered the English court system, together with the influence of wider 'Italian culture', understood as courtly manners and pastimes, The tutors to a succession of monarchs from this time onwards were steeped in humanist learning and spoke Italian as a matter of course, passing it on to their young royal charges ^[30]. The capacity to acquire knowledge of foreign languages and to use them eloquently was a key part of the humanist ideal of the cultivation of the mind and soul. The Italian language was derived from Latin, and as that was the language of the revered ancients according to humanist learning, to speak Italian was in some measure to be in touch with, and to be the avatar of, the civilization of the Romans. It was becoming for a monarch or cultivated courtier to be able to demonstrate such accomplishments ^[23].

The compelling power of humanist discourse lay in its

dividing up of the nations of Europe into two opposing camps, civilized and uncivilized. As this symbolic division took ever greater hold in the minds of the English upper classes, the demand arose among elites to absorb the lessons of the ancient Graeco-Roman past through direct contact with it, or at least what was left of it in Italy. During the second half of the 15th century, the number of Englishmen travelling to Italy increased, along with the number of Italian books and translations of Italian books being imported into England. The collective understanding of Italy as the seat of all European learning centred on the very high reputation of its universities and learned men. Throughout Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, Italian universities were considered exemplary and attracted students from all over the world ^[31]. English aristocratic families increasingly sent their male offspring to attend one or more of the Italian universities ^[31].

Education in a humanist direction was also developing in England itself. It was in large part because the monarchy had embraced humanism that John Colet and Thomas More sought and were permitted to reform secondary education, basing it around the humanist curriculum grounded in Roman and Greek texts taken to be 'classical'. Following Colet's founding of St. Paul's School in London in 1509, by 1551 a nationally spanning network of free grammar schools organised around and teaching a humanist curriculum had been established. A significant part of that curriculum involved the reading and translation of ancient texts ^[28].

Yet the increasing presence of such texts within the arteries of elite English education was not achieved through simple processes of appropriation alone. The increasing inevitability of ancient Roman works in particular in such education systems was also due to a certain kind of purification of them that worked through the crucible of Protestant denunciations of Catholicism in general, and of Italian books more particularly ^[32].

Queen Elizabeth I was a particularly proficient student of Italian and other languages. Her tutor was Roger Ascham, not just a pedagogue and Protestant moralist, but a highly influential figure at her court too ^[33]. Ascham was a key figure in separating out and severing the previous symbolic ties binding contemporary Catholic Italy and the 'moral and intellectual discipline of its classical past' ^[34]. He had to deal with a problem that other elite humanists of Protestant persuasions also found troubling. This was to find a way to fit the 'profound reverence for classical learning', a disposition that the influence of humanism had by now cultivated among the learned and cultured, together with Protestant piety. The latter was a cultural disposition based on distrust, if not outright loathing, of

the Catholic Church, an institution that dominated both present-day Rome, the Italian peninsula, and indeed the use of the Latin language as an international mode of communication^[35].

Together with fellow pedagogues and learned men, such as Philemon Holland and William Harrison, Ascham's version of humanism equated 'virtue with classical, pagan Rome, and vice with contemporary, Catholic Rome'^[34]. Ascham drew to the attention of his elite audience the difference between the classical Italy of the civilized Roman empire, and later and present-day Italy under the domination of the barbaric Roman Catholic Church.

Emphasising the starkness of the contrast he had erected (on the basis of earlier Protestant political theology), Ascham^[36] sought to undermine any possible semblance of continuity between classical and contemporary Rome:

Tyme was, whan Italie and Rome, have bene, to the greate good of us that now live... But now that tyme is gone, and though the place remayne the same, yet the old and present manners, do differ as farre, as black and white, as virtue and vice. Vertue once made that contrie Mistres over all the worlde. Vice now maketh that contrie slave to them...

A similar rhetorical strategy was employed by Protestant scholar and translator Philemon Holland, in the preface to his translation of the work of the Roman historian Livy. Holland erects a very similar boundary between 'corrupt modern Italy' and 'virtuous ancient Rome'^[37]. He noted of the present-day Romans that they are 'so farre degenerate ... now from that auncient people, so devoute, so vertuous and uncorrupt, in old time'^[37].

The chasm thus created, which separated classical and contemporary Italy as if they were on two different planets, had direct practical implications for pedagogy. Ascham^[36] averred that:

Italie now, is not that Italie, that it was wont to be; and therefore now, not so fitte a place, as some do counte it, for yong men to fetch either wisdome or honestie from thence'.

This was a notable countermove against the earlier trend whereby members of the courtly aristocracy had sent forth their male offspring to Italy as part of their preparation for life in general, and particularly for a career modelled on the humanist ideal of noble service to the state^[3]. While still acknowledging the wisdom of the classical Roman authors and texts, the practice of physically travelling to Italy was no longer deemed desirable by Ascham and his peers. In place of attending one of the Italian universities *in situ*, Ascham and his associates instead counselled that the encounter with Roman antiquity take place via bookish means only, through being exposed by responsi-

ble pedagogues to a select number of 'authorised texts'^[33].

A strong distinction was made between texts considered legitimate means for learning, and 'certain types of vernacular literature' that were not suitable for the young and impressionable^[34]. The apparently inexorable rising tide of disreputable, seditious, and immoral Italian books, and translations into English thereof, that were circulating in England, was cause for concern among pedagogues and moralists. In line with advances in print technology, the number of Italian books imported into or printed in England continued to increase at this time^[38,39]. Ascham worried that there were 'more of these ungratious bookes set out in Printe within these fewe monethes, than haue bene sene in England many score yeare before'^[36].

Such books were seen to be 'props in a more insidious game of religious warfare', fomented by unscrupulous Catholics, both in England and abroad. This framing of 'unauthorized' Italian books as vehicles of moral and spiritual pollution formed part of a wider attempt to stem the flow of cultural influence pouring into England from Italy^[34].

But at the same time as, and indeed because of, the trend towards fears of culturally corrupting Italian and Catholic textual trash accentuating, the purity of ancient Roman texts, which were thought to be worthy of being a central part of the official curriculum of elite education, was further affirmed. Those ancient texts were further purified and sanctified, and decoupled from any specific surrounding social context, partly—and ironically—because the particular cultural context surrounding them had been framed as so polluted, it being flooded with Papist propaganda and Italian cultural detritus^[32].

As these texts were ever more purified, they also became ever more suitable for educational uses. As educational establishments opened that catered more for the young of the middling classes, ancient Roman texts became obligatory there, because of their morally uplifting, as well as intellectually rigorous, qualities^[19,40,41].

This meant that tropes taken from texts permeated wider social spheres. For example, the subject matter and themes of later 16th century English dramaturgy owe much to ancient Roman models^[42]. The English dramatists were well versed in both classical Roman and more contemporary Italian drama and poetry, these now being part of the wider literary culture. The social basis for this situation was that the vast majority of the dramatists had attended the newer humanist-inspired grammar schools^[43].

But no matter what uses the ancient texts might be put to, whether directly or indirectly, or for more idealistic or more base reasons, they remained unbesmirchable by even the most vulgar domains, such as the popular thea-

tre, within which they exercised influence. Such was their prestige that they floated free of all particular social domains. They were culturally pervasive while also ontologically impermeable. Their widely assumed timelessness was a powerful prophylactic against any possible corruption by associations with things lowly and base.

4. Narrating Rome and the Cultural Trauma of the English Civil War

By the 17th century, the social formation that could be called the English upper class comprised three major fractions: freeholders, gentry, and aristocracy. Of these, the aristocracy was the most financially affluent, politically and culturally influential, and fewest in number. It was comprised of about four hundred families, organised hierarchically around the axes of kinship, age, and gender^[44]. While somewhat less closed than their European counterparts, entry into the English aristocracy was still tightly bounded. Reproduction of this elite occurred over time through the inheritance of seat, estates, status, title, and membership of the peerage, while the perceived nature of a family's pedigree informed how prestigious any given inheritance was^[45].

That the English aristocracy managed to survive the 17th century, a period characterised by bloody civil war in the 1640s and early 1650s, and religiously inspired violence, belies a profound symbolic debt to what was taken to be the 'classical' Roman past. Indeed, it was not despite the English civil war that upper class interest in, and veneration of, classical Roman civilization and its texts intensified. Instead, it was *because* of the civil war that classical Roman civilization came to infiltrate and inform the present in new and deeply constitutive ways.

The civil war of the mid-17th century is one of the most violent periods in English history. In 1649, King Charles I was executed and more people in England were killed per capita than in World War One. Moreover, ongoing Protestant paranoia concerning the Catholic threat came to a head in the bloody events of the anti-Popish campaigns of the years 1678-1680^[46].

The beheading of the King at the hands of Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentary and Puritan forces struck a devastating blow to the symbolic system characteristic of aristocratic society, bringing into crisis various core mythologies on which previous elite thought and feeling had been based^[47]. The beliefs and ideals enshrined in the doctrine of the divine right of kings^[48] and the discourse of the King's two bodies—the notion that the physical body of the monarch was conjoined to a perfect symbolic body that represented the divinely ordained State—drew the monarch into the sphere of the godly. Both concep-

tions were violently fractured by the civil war^[49]. The regicide demonstrated in shocking, vivid, heightened, and bloody terms that even the most sacred values, ones codified within religiously legitimated political doctrine apparently since time immemorial, were seen to be vulnerable to open violation, if not now completely and irrevocably destroyed.

Following Charles II's return to England as king in 1660, the language of power in the Restoration and post-Restoration periods was not the same as it had been hitherto. Thereafter, royal power was 'assertive rather than simply declarative', because now all the main political players knew that the king could always be deposed again if his rule became too unacceptable to certain portions of the populace, especially the elite sectors^[49].

While the civil war left deep and wounding cultural traces within and across all groups in English society, it was the aristocracy that felt those effects most acutely. Despite being the chief beneficiaries of the Revolutionary Settlement of 1660 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688^[50], the legitimacy of the aristocracy had been badly undermined. A crisis of identity threatened to undermine the legitimacy both of the aristocracy's position at the apex of English society and of their newly acquired powers as a brake on monarchical power. It was with a view to ensuring that ongoing revolution should henceforth seem inconceivable, that aristocratic claims-makers of all political persuasions set about making political meaning anew^[51].

The making and mobilisation of a Roman-inspired cultural trauma narrative was central to the restoration of the collective identity of the aristocracy in the decades both prior to and following on from the Glorious Revolution of 1688. By analogising the civil wars of Republican Rome with those of the recent English past, the aristocratic beneficiaries of the new constitution were able to 'implot' themselves within the narrative as the rightful and heroic guardians of liberty and civic virtue. By contrast, advocates of the monarchist, absolutist, and Catholic political cause associated with the royal House of Stuart were vilified on account of the threat they posed, not just to the sacred ideals and values enshrined in the new political constitution, but also the very status of England as a Protestant nation^[52].

The concept of cultural trauma has been used by sociologists to analyse political assassinations within the 20th and 21st centuries^[16,53]. Here we use it to examine the interpretative processes and cultural framing of the execution—a kind of 'assassination'—of King Charles I. Eyerman notes that 'an assassination can create a community, at least in the associative sense, as much as it can threaten or destroy one'^[15]. One can examine attempts at restor-

ing communal and societal stability among members of the politically polarised aristocracy following the King's demise. The narratives of trauma that emerged during the second half of the 17th century were driven by a collective need felt by aristocratic actors to 'work through' and define the meanings of the regicide and the ensuing civil conflict, in the direction of restoring symbolic order to what seemed to them to be devastated and chaotic cultural, social, religious and political landscapes^[18].

Legally and constitutionally speaking, the collective restorative work resulting in the Glorious Revolution of 1688—a bloodless coup deposing King James and replacing him on the English throne with William and Mary, and thereby setting up a new constitutional order—was codified in the language of English common law^[49,51]. But the attempt to secure lasting civil peace through the ratification of abstract legal and constitutional codes remained at best precarious, and at worst empty rhetoric, liable to collapse in the absence of an emotionally and psychologically compelling narrative within which to anchor it. Further in-fighting within the aristocracy threatened to undermine the new constitution and the privileged status of the aristocracy in the wider social structure^[51].

The compelling power of narratives of restoring civil peace that emerged during the final decades of the 17th century, accounts which sought to restore stability for and among the aristocracy, resided in large part in its selective use and re-appropriation of ancient Roman symbolisms, resting in, taken from, and deployed on the basis of, texts taken to be classical. Concurrent with the codification of the new constitution in the language of common law and Parliamentary bills, aristocrats of all political persuasions, as well as intellectuals and political commentators working for and alongside them, collectively constructed a general narrative line, one centred upon analogies between the period of civil wars that ultimately led to the fall of the ancient Roman republic, and the events of the English civil war^[54].

As Ayres^[51] notes, 'in the first five or six decades after 1688', members of the aristocracy 'whether Whig, Tories or commonwealthmen', worked together 'to support the privilege and power of the English patriciate, often quite explicitly', and in so doing sought to forge a new era of aristocratically dominated social peace.

Through aristocratic patronage in the literary arts, writers, playwrights and poets were recruited to this cultural cause. The latter were keen to profit from the reimagining of post-Restoration England as 'Augustan', a term referring to that period in Roman history during which the arts apparently flourished under the rule of the first of the emperors, Augustus. The use and appropriation of Roman

symbolism and imagery proliferated as artists sought to secure lucrative forms of patronage among members of the aristocracy. These were willing to support and promote the kind of socio-political vision of harmony that associated contemporary England with what was taken to be one of the most fulsome periods of ancient history^[55,56].

The narrative of the later 17th century developed and mutated as England entered into the early years of the 18th century. It became more potentially contradictory, and potentially at odds with its original aristocratic progenitors. Some elements of it were very clear. The absolutist monarchs Charles I and James II were the villains. It was they, in their striving for absolute power, together with the backing of the Roman Catholic Church, who had brought chaos and war to England. The Church was once again reactivated as the incarnation of every kind of evil, a clear depiction of infamy and perfidy that had deep roots in Protestant circles in England^[57].

What was far less obvious was the ongoing need for the aristocracy within the newly instituted structure of constitutional power. As a political class, the aristocracy had in this narrative shown themselves to be both morally and spiritually corrupt and corruptible, their turpitude enabling the absolutist kings and thereby bringing the ruin of civil strife upon the land. Why should England keep them, and why should other groups allow them to retain their power?

The aristocracy was a tiny group in comparison to the rest of the population. From 1689 to 1784, 'the size of the peerage remained roughly constant at 160 and 170 titles', and so the English aristocracy during this period functioned as a numerically small but tremendously powerful ruling oligarchy^[58]. Within this elite, politics converged on two main positions: Whig and Tory. These were not unified and homogenous parties, but instead comprised loose configurations centring on some individual or group whose views spanned anything from 'Court Whig, dissident, Whig (or 'Patriot'), Opposition, Tory and even to an extent Jacobite'^[51].

The social and political outlook of Whigs was less reactionary than that of the Tories. Whigs saw Parliament as crucial to delimiting and regulating the power of the monarch. Radical Whigs 'shaded off into doctrinaire republicans'^[59]. By contrast, Tory politics centred on the old ideology of divine right monarchy, although after 1688 it was expected that the monarch would operate within a framework of law and in dialogue with his greatest subjects congregated in Parliament^[59].

For both more Whiggish and more Tory aristocratic families, a key register of family pedigree was possession of a 'proper education', one that was usually very 'classical' in nature and defined by deference to predominantly

Roman, more than Greek, authors and texts^[40,41,60]. Aristocratic education was concentrated in a small cadre of elite institutions. At the school level, aristocrats attended either Eton, Westminster, Winchester, or Harrow^[61]. At the university level, the number of aristocratic peers attending Oxford or Cambridge between 1711 and 1740 was around fifty percent^[62]. The chief purpose of elite education was to prepare young men for taking up their place in political life^[63].

Within this milieu, knowledge of Roman authors was profound. For example, at Eton, having begun with Phaedrus, the elegiac poets and Terence, pupils typically went on to read the ‘Aeneid at least twice and all of Horace ... two or three times’^[41]. Part of the preference for Roman authors—in comparison to ancient Greek ones—derived from their perceived instructiveness in practical matters, ‘such as farming (Hesiod, Virgil), warfare (Livy, Frontinus, Aelian) ... architecture (Vitruvius) ... [and] matters of moral and political behaviour’^[41]. Within politics, Horace and Virgil were held to be particularly instructive^[40]. Read as literary works, many of the aforementioned classical Roman authors were perceived as exemplary in the virtues of order, symmetry, balance, and restraint^[64].

5. Whigging Rome

While politics was central to aristocratic life, and English politics was dominated by aristocrats, their outlook was steeped in ancient Roman texts taught to them at school and university, and this applied to aristocrats of both major political persuasions, Whig and Tory. Each put classical texts to work for the purposes of representing contemporary political life and crafting exemplary accounts of it^[64].

We will now concentrate on Whig propagandists and thinkers, and how they dealt with the potential problem of a post-civil war narrative coming to condemn the aristocracy in general, and themselves in particular, as the progenitors of political malaise and social disaster. Whig writers continually made connections between contemporary political events and ancient Rome, even more so than their Tory counterparts^[51].

As read through the prism of Whig political thinking and historiography, the regicide and the civil wars symbolised an act of collective failure. This had two dimensions. These were: failure to live up to the noble political ideals taken to be at the heart of ancient Roman republicanism on the one hand; and failure to observe the lessons of Posterity on the other. Viewed through the lens of considerations of Roman republicanism, it was not the aristocracy as such which had caused the civil war. Rather, it

was the flawed design of the English political constitution in which the aristocracy and monarchy were situated. The lapse into moral decadence and political corruption on the part of the aristocracy had therefore occurred not as an outcome of an excessive and putrid lifestyle and dispositions, but a failure to restrain the forces of monarchical absolutism. It was the flawed design of the constitution which had failed, not the aristocracy *per se*^[51].

Within this narrative framework, it was thought to be obvious that without a strong constitutional brake on the power of the monarchy, the social order would be corrupted, and civil conflict must inevitably follow. The rise to power of Julius Caesar had proven this in the Roman past, and the reigns of Charles I and James II had proven it in the recent English present. The warnings of ancient authors concerning the case of the former seemed to apply just as much, and directly so, to the doings of the latter figures^[65].

In stark contrast to the tyrannies of both ancient and more recent times, the most successful and stable polities had constitutions allowing for checks and balances between different forms of power. That the much-admired Venetian republic had endured for so long was also cited by political commentators, especially of Whiggish dispositions, as testimony to this^[66].

Aside from providing mundane forms of lasting political stability, mixed constitutions facilitated the real-world realisation of what Whig politicians and historiographers regarded as the sacred values on which only the highest forms of civilization were founded, that is ‘freedom’ and ‘virtue’. It was on account of the perceived threat posed to these values by the last of the Roman Kings, Tarquinius, that he had been expelled by the Romans in 509 BCE^[67]. According to both ancient authors and present-day exegetes, under Tarquinius’ reign, there had been no *libertas*, only domination by the ruler and his henchmen over everyone else, both great and small. Without liberty there could be no meaningful conception of *civitas*, that brand of civic virtue that accrued to a citizenry that recognised the indispensable role of the State as the natural and true guarantor of individual liberty^[51].

Yet while republican Rome had been constituted through its rejection of monarchy, such a course of action was deemed neither necessary nor desirable from the point of view of the commentators associated with the Whig aristocracy. The history of the present needed to be re-written in such a way that enabled the Roman conception of liberty to be reorganised around the ideals legitimating private property. A central text in this regard was John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). This treatise borrowed heavily from the vision of Roman

republicanism offered by the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini. Locke argued that the primary function of government was securing the ‘safety’ of the propertied classes ^[68]. The latter were the ‘guarantors and guardians of liberty’, the biggest threats to which comprised potential despots on the one hand, and the tyranny of the masses on the other ^[68].

In shoring up the nexus of discursive and normative associations binding ‘liberty’ with ‘property’, the Whig aristocratic mindset sought to represent the Whigs as the rightful guarantors and protectors of the sacred Roman-derived values of liberty and civic virtue. Henceforth England could and should be understood as that apparently contradictory, but on the Whig view eminently possible and indeed greatly laudable, entity, ‘a republic with a King’ ^[51].

The Whiggish collective representation of England as a ‘mixed polity’ enabled the newly ratified constitution to be sanctified, precisely because it was made to exist in the aura of its idealised ancient predecessor, the Roman republican mode of just and balanced government. Various historical facts that the ancient texts themselves inconveniently attested were sidelined or ignored in the idealising treatment of republican Rome. The threat posed to the Roman republic had not been regal absolutism, but rather the rise of a populist demagogue, Julius Caesar. That Rome was polytheistic, possessed of a standing army, and founded on a brutal slave regime, were other matters that were cut out of the frame, so that analogies between republican Rome and present-day England could be created and put to work ^[69]. The selective use of ancient texts was part of a broad strategy whereby aristocratic authors and other apologists sought to represent themselves as essential to mediating the twin threats of monarchical absolutism on the one hand and mob rule on the other ^[51].

Aristocratic intellectuals were acutely aware that excessive in-fighting within their social and political circle was liable once again to result in collective self-destruction. Yet at the start of the 18th century, the political rivalry between Whigs and Tories was simultaneously represented by, and in some ways further stimulated through, the intellectual productions of each side representing themselves as morally more virtuous than the other. That meant presenting one’s own grouping as the contemporary equivalent of certain iconic figures, namely those taken to be the most morally pure republican Romans ^[65].

While politics involved such dynamics, other social domains were heavily influenced by politically mobilised Roman themes and texts too. The number of theatrical works based on Roman themes had been rising in the late 17th century. The number of performances of Shake-

speare’s Roman plays increased too. In early 18th century theatre, as well as political commentary and poetry, the collectively held stock of classical learning was converted ‘into morally weighted archetypes to be used in English political controversy’ ^[65]. The archetypal heroes of the Roman Republic invoked in dramatic works of the period included Cicero, Pompey, Brutus, and Cato ^[70].

When Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato, A Tragedy*, was staged for the first time in 1712, the audience was already primed towards identifying positively with the protagonist, Cato the Younger, his reputation as the personification of Roman republican virtue having long been established in both Whig and Tory circles alike ^[70]. William Hunt’s play *The Fall of Tarquin* (1713) was particularly popular with Whig audiences, dealing as it did with the demise of tyrannous kingship in early Rome and its replacement with republican virtues. In Handel’s opera, *Lucia Cornelia Silla*, first performed in 1713, the Roman general Sulla was intended to symbolise the Duke of Marlborough, who had served virtuously at the court of James II, the successor of Charles II, and had won military fame in the European wars ^[71].

6. Rome and the British Empire

Through the selective and self-serving use of analogies centring on both the constitutional virtues and tragic fall of republican Rome, the English aristocracy culturally processed and to some extent overcame the shocks of the civil war period and its aftermath. Representations of republican Rome were central to the making and mobilisation of the trauma narrative that emerged in the wake of the regicide and the ensuing civil wars, providing the symbolic resources used by an otherwise divided aristocracy to make sense of, affirm, and communicate the legitimacy of their role within the newly founded political regime. At the same time, Roman material was put to work in the cultural struggles for political supremacy between Tories and Whigs. Yet as the 18th century went on, the appropriation of ancient Roman symbolism did not end once the damage inflicted upon the identity and legitimacy of the aristocracy had been to a significant extent culturally repaired.

With the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, English elite identities merged and mutated in line with newer and wider ‘British’ senses of self-conception. Roman imagery and analogies with Roman history provided a shared symbolic repertoire with which members of the social elites pertaining to all four nations of the United Kingdom—English, Scots, Welsh and Irish—could collectively re-imagine and represent themselves as bound by rank and title in ways which transcended, rather than being divided by, nationally specific forms of cultural

difference, identity, and patriotism^[52].

In this new socio-political context, rather than declining in relevance, the citational value of Roman civilization and ancient texts representing it further increased. This was in ways characterised by two inter-related developments.

The first was a shift in focus away from republican Rome and towards giving more attention to its imperial successor. This happened at the same time as, and ultimately because of, the newly constituted United Kingdom rapidly becoming a leading imperial power. This was a period of aggressive expansionism on the part of British traders and colonists. Despite—or as Ferguson^[72] argues, perhaps *because of*—the English Civil War, pre-Act of Union England had managed to secure and set up colonies in Jamaica, East India, the West Indies, and other locations. Its future seemed to be one of creating and running a vast imperial network, partly based on enforcing advantageous terms of trade on independent polities, and partly based on direct colonisation of conquered and annexed territories.

The second, and related, development was a shift in the typical attitude of aristocrats towards the Romans, moving from the great reverence accorded them previously, towards a certain feeling of superiority in regard to them. A growing sense of superiority vis-a-vis Roman civilization, in both its republican and imperial forms, was an increasingly marked feature of the collective identity of the English aristocracy and its apologists as the 18th century wore on. Rather paradoxically, therefore, the emerging sense of superiority to the Romans was a feature of the very period during which the symbolic significance of the Roman world reached its highpoint in England^[55,69].

The two tendencies came together in a specific articulation. References to imperial Rome were central to the collective representation of the British empire as the greatest imperial super-power the world had ever known. In that sense, the British empire was in its time the direct equivalent of the Roman one, which in its period had been the greatest empire in the world. At the same time, the view of the British empire as having surpassed in scale and supremacy its Roman forebear, steadily gained traction both at home and abroad as the 18th century progressed^[73]. As a result, the attitude towards the Romans was ever more characterised by a mixture of the previously held reverence towards them together with certain strains of condescension and even contempt.

This set of attitudes applied for understandings of both imperial and republican Rome. In the case of the latter, by the mid-18th century the previous modality of self-doubt amongst the aristocracy had waned since the post-civil

war period, and now there was a widespread belief in aristocratic circles that they had triumphed where their republican Roman counterparts had failed. The failure of republicanism had ushered in the era of imperial tyranny at home, even if it also meant the creation of the greatest empire that the world had seen to that point in history. Empire as the tyrannous consequence of the weakness and failure of republicanism; and empire as the great bringer of civilization to ever more parts of the world—these were two major poles through which British elite thought operated, and oscillated between, throughout the 18th century^[55].

This narrative had it that in England, the aristocracy had beaten back the forces of political tyranny, whereas in republican Rome, tyranny had ultimately triumphed. While the assassination of Julius Caesar by Brutus and his co-conspirators signified a triumph for the Roman republic—a series of events dramatized already in 1681 in Nathaniel Lee's play, *Lucius Junius Brutus*—that victory was short-lived^[74]. Less than a decade later, in 27 BCE, the inauguration of Caesar's nephew, the emperor Augustus, was seen to signal the beginning of the end for the finely balanced constitution of republican Rome.

That the Emperor Augustus was an autocrat and tyrant was a point of 'historical fact' on which all fractions of the aristocracy could now agree^[65]. Previous positive representations of the first emperor gave way to more negative shadings. The message was the same, whether it came from Whigs or Tories^[51].

By contrast, it was widely thought that in the English context, the advocates of tyranny in the form of regal absolutism had been successfully beaten back. While the Whiggish interpretation of the history of republican Rome was narrated in the language of tragedy, the resolution of the civil war and the reconstitution of England as a republic with a King, was narrated as a triumph. These developments were interpreted by aristocratic thinkers and by the wide range of scholars, political commentators, religious figures, and artists associated with them, as incontrovertible evidence not just of the superiority of British civilization vis-à-vis its republican and imperial Roman predecessors, but its contemporary European counterparts too, in particular the great and hated rivals, the French^[52].

In the spheres of politics and science, Britain's reputation grew throughout the 18th century. The British parliament was 'regarded on the Continent as the embodiment of the rights of the citizen' and the home of political liberalism^[56,75,76]. This was a view reflected back to the British by a series of distinguished foreigners, both at home and abroad, who testified 'to the brilliance of the English political solution'^[62]. Together with France, Britain was

held as a driving force of the Enlightenment^[55]. London's claim to be the greatest capital city in Europe was one rooted in the fusing of science and architecture, a claim made concrete following the completion of new buildings such as the Greenwich Observatory, Westminster Bridge, and the reconstructed Westminster Abbey^[55].

The very distinctive power structure of the post-1707 British state, especially when compared to those of Spain and France, was thought by contemporaries to be highly expedient in facilitating the rapidity with which the British empire grew throughout the 18th century. Acting as a check on excessive taxation, the political regime of constitutional monarchy and Parliament was understood to have facilitated the development of an economic and political climate highly conducive to entrepreneurship and commercial growth. The result was that British merchants, investors, and speculators had little to fear in terms of their financial gains being excessively taxed and drained by an avaricious monarch^[72].

The contemporary interpretation of these developments, coupled with the shift in attention more towards imperial Rome and away from the perceived failures of the republican period, and the robust citational appeal of Rome's imperial history, fed into and fuelled the shared sense among aristocratic observers that Britain had now firmly established its place on the world historical stage. From the middle of the century, notes Black^[55], 'modern Britain was held to define civilization, a view not common in earlier times, and one that reflected the greater self-confidence and wealth of the British in this period'.

Set against the backdrop of these developments, and seen through the lens of their collective representation by aristocrats and their outriders in political and artistic circles, imperial Rome and its unique civilization assumed the status of ideals that aristocratic thinkers understood themselves not only to have realised and equalled, but also to have actively and conspicuously surpassed^[52].

Therefore, when Britain secured important victories over France and Spain during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), references to imperial Rome were central to the symbolic interpretation and narration of the victories. This is illustrated by Whig politician and man of letters Horace Walpole's^[77] contemporary correspondence:

We have taken more places and ships in a week than would have set up such pendant nations as Greece and Rome to all futurity ... we should be quoted as a thousand years hence as the patterns of valour, virtue, and disinterestedness.

From the middle of the 18th century onwards, the practice of analogising and narrating Britain's imperial expansionism with reference to imperial Rome had become

commonplace among aristocratic commentators. Even when losses to the empire were sustained, defeat served to affirm rather than deny the validity of the analogy. Commentators likened Britain's loss of the colony of America to Rome's loss of Carthage^[55]. Even in times of setback and adversity to the imperial project, Roman symbolism was used by aristocratic actors to understand and represent to themselves and others the national self-confidence and the self-image of Britain as a beacon, and globe-spanning spreader, of civilization^[56].

This situation in turn led to a new manner of thinking about Rome during the final third of the 18th century. As the collective identity of the British aristocracy grew in assuredness and confidence as the imperial achievements mounted, rather paradoxically the symbolism of ancient Rome came increasingly to centre on imagery and metaphors of decline and decadence^[78].

This symbolic re-framing of Rome and Roman civilization took place through the works of multiple political and cultural commentators, scholars, and artists. The later 18th century witnessed 'the climax of the widespread interest in ruins' which had begun in earlier decades. Ancient ruins took 'on a didactic meaning ... a *momento mori*, for the purposes of moral edification'^[79]. This general symbolism of Roman (and Greek) ruins formed the cultural context within which the poets John Dyer and George Keate published their respective works, *The Ruins of Rome*, (1740) and *Ancient and Modern Rome, A Poem Written in Rome in the Year 1755* (1760).

Within the visual arts, the series of etchings of Rome entitled *Grotteschi* by the Italian artist Giovanni Piranesi played an important part in re-symbolising visually the increasingly strongly held view of Rome, the city and the empire, not as triumphant but as 'fallen'. Coming into circulation during the 1740s, Piranesi's works rendered Rome with an emphasis on the *sic transit*, as opposed to *gloria mundi*, of the city's grand past, as contrasted with its fallen and forlorn present. His images of grandiose but melancholy Roman ruins were keenly sought by British aristocratic and haute bourgeois collectors^[55].

Within wider intellectual life, the visual and verbal representation of the theme of the fall of the city of Rome and its empire provided a fecund generative source which contemporaries could reflect upon, and extract valuable lessons from, what was taken to be Posterity. This was also the primary purpose of philosophical historiography as understood at the time^[80,81]. Leading Enlightenment scholars such as David Hume, Edward Gibbon, and Edmund Burke, each of whom occupied prominent positions within intellectual and political life, 'recognised and reflected on the interpenetration of culture and politics' in

their respective writings on Roman history in general, and on the decline and fall of the city and empire of Rome in particular ^[73].

It was the work of Gibbon—a conservative in politics and yet a ‘modernist in philosophy and religion’—that arguably did most to consolidate the symbolic reframing of Rome as a tragic warning to Britain and its burgeoning empire ^[82]. In Gibbon’s ^[83] account of the moment when he first felt moved to write his magnum opus, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the evocativeness of the iconic setting of classical Rome is all important:

[It was] on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter; that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.

Of the bathetic juxtaposition between the ruined nature of the present-day city of Rome and the glory of its imperial antecedent at its zenith, Gibbon ^[83] wrote that the view confronting him afforded ‘ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave’.

The implication here—not limited to Gibbon alone, but part of the collective classification of Roman history that his contemporaries laboured within too—was thus. If the British empire had become as great or greater than its Roman predecessor, it too would and must fall prey to the vicissitudes of time and fate.

Gibbon’s reflections upon the possibility or likelihood that the cyclical nature of history would mean that the same calamities that had led to the decline and fall of imperial Rome might befall the British Empire, indicate a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, he sought to appease such culturally powerful worries with the hope that ‘experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes—since technical skills could never be lost, no people would relapse into their original barbarism’ ^[75].

On the other hand, the whole weight of historical experience was adduced in the annals concerning the seemingly inexorable fall of Rome. This sense of fatefulness was attested by the ranks of the ancient authors, with whom, like other intellectuals educated in England, Gibbon was highly familiar with. They had been concerned in their historiography and biography with the fate of peoples and the vicissitudes of individual human existence. The ancient literature seemed to point in a most troubling direction, that is, the tragic and inevitable dissolution of all things. That included the very civilization which the ancient authors were both constitutive parts of, and also, when read in a specific light, eloquent obituarists of.

If comparisons to imperial Rome had been a boon to British self-aggrandizement and self-justification for earlier generations—and would continue to be so into the 19th and 20th centuries—it is noteworthy that already by Gibbons’ time such analogies could take on a much more melancholy, self-doubting, and even wistfully bitter quality.

7. Conclusions

The double-edged nature of comparing the Roman and British empires is just one feature of a broader set of tendencies that this paper has identified and set out in a cultural sociological register.

We have seen how humanist understandings of the classicity of ancient Roman texts, which were originally developed in Italy, were taken up by English humanists. There was a further purifying of these texts, rendering them seemingly context-free and eminently adaptable to changing social circumstances and the comprehension thereof. The relatively autonomous and free-floating nature of Roman literary texts allowed them to be taken up in different ways at different times for different purposes by different sorts of actors, especially aristocratic ones or those closely associated with aristocratic viewpoints. Their autonomous nature meant that uses of them at one point in time could be very different from those made at later points in time.

Texts describing republican Rome, and those depicting the transition from that political condition to the emergence of the Roman empire, were particularly appealing to English exegetes in the 17th and 18th centuries. These writings were deployed to make sense of the English Civil War and its aftermath, to carve out variant political identities, and to reflect upon the rise of the British Empire, which was understood to have surpassed its Roman counterpart. It was also sometimes feared that the British empire might eventually succumb to a similar fate as its ancient antecedent.

The paper has illustrated how and why the hopes and fears of English elites, as these were woven into and through the creation and mutation of political and national identities, were worked out through reflection upon and deployment of Roman texts. While much of the specific empirical detail that the paper has adduced will be familiar to specialists of the subject matter and of English history in the periods in question, we hope that the sociological approach to these materials has furnished scholarship, in classical reception studies and related fields, with two pointers.

In the first place, we have tried to set out a novel viewpoint on how and why the appropriation and use of Roman texts unfolded over time across different social

and political contexts. In order to do that, we have in the second place endeavoured to develop a systematizing vocabulary that can synthesize more particular phenomena, and studies of them, and enfold them all into wider narratives that flow across several centuries and variant social domains.

In essence, we have proposed a general terminology that can pull together into broader stories many diverse, ideographically rendered materials that would otherwise remain mostly within specialist studies of specific times and places, and thereby remain in relative isolation from each other. Sociology is a generalizing science par excellence. We have used a sociological approach to classical textual reception that derives from a type of sociology that is especially attuned to how cultural phenomena play out within social contexts in ways that are irreducible to the latter. This is a mode of analysis that sees how cultural goods, including ancient texts, can in fact make their own distinctive marks upon social circumstances, rather than just be marked by them. Such an approach can, at the very least, place specificities within much broader and longer-term contexts than might normally be afforded by more specialized scholarship, no matter how valuable and insightful it may be in itself.

The sort of sociologizing we have carried out here—in this case, of Roman materials being taken up in early modern England—could be developed further and extended to encompass many other contexts of reception, including other very old texts as they have been made to play out in modern social settings.

Author Contributions

The paper was co-authored equally by each author. Inglis carried out the conceptual refinement of the empirical materials collected and originally synthesized by Thorpe. Both authors together wrote the text itself.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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