

*Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British
Imagination, 1789-1832*
by Jonathan Sachs

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In this, his first monograph, Jonathan Sachs explores the meaning and uses of the idea of ancient Rome for Romantic writers and the ways in which Rome was portrayed and utilised in literature to forge a sense of British national identity and political modernity. *Romantic Antiquity* breaks from a critical tradition that has tended to champion the cultural importance of ancient Greece at the expense of Rome, and to view Romantic responses to antiquity as continuations of earlier eighteenth-century neo-classicism. Instead, the book suggests that Rome became increasingly relevant in the Romantic period, providing a set of symbols and references with which writers could forge a new and distinctive aesthetic. This aesthetic was both shaped by and contributed to contemporary political concerns. In particular, Sachs is concerned with how Rome informed aesthetic responses to the French Revolution, the mass democratic movements of the Romantic period, calls for extension of the franchise, and imperial expansion.

The book is divided into three parts according to genre, with Sachs examining the uses of Rome in political writing and the novel, poetry, and drama respectively. Part one asks:

What happens to the use of republican Rome in England when, with the onset of the French Revolution, the

French also begin to make use of the Roman republican tradition? (p.34).

This acknowledges the fact that Rome, as a means of creating useable political and national identities, was not without conflict and contradiction in the Romantic period. Given the political structure of ancient Rome - oligarchic and aristocratic ruling elites tempered by an often equally influential popular element in the form of the tribunes of the people - it is easy to appreciate Sachs's central point that the idea of Rome could be moulded to mean different things for different individuals and political groups. Sachs uses the works and letters of the conservative Edmund Burke, as well as more radical thinkers such as Thomas Paine and William Godwin, to show how references to the republican past and its heroes can be read as much more than mere textual adornment. Instead these references can be seen as indicators of a serious contest over who should be the rightful heirs to the republican tradition in a time of revolution and upheaval.

Part two explores the significance of the Roman example in articulating notions of the self and the decline of literary standards in the poetry of Byron and Shelley, examining the poetic and ideological conflicts inherent in the Greek and Roman traditions. Yet Sachs reserves his most innovative and fruitful work for the final section on Romantic drama. Beginning with a rich performance history of Shakespeare's Roman plays in the eighteenth century, Sachs argues that London theatres depicting ancient Rome provided a physical and ideological space that was both sufficiently foreign and yet still familiar enough to accommodate debate about British popular identity and the rights and roles of the people in the political process. Indeed, the book is eager to insist that Rome was a key contributor to the 'flourishing of a plebeian public sphere' (p.271)

that existed in the theatres, clubs, and public houses of the city, rather than in the halls of Westminster, and was central to those calls for political reform which would eventually be addressed by the Reform Act of 1832.

The book takes a strongly new historicist approach to the material, drawing upon an array of written sources to establish the place of the classics in the episteme of the period. The personal letters of William Godwin and a young Shelley, in which the two men debate the virtues of Rome and Greece as models for literature and society (pp.8-12), are a particularly memorable example of the insights to be gained from such an approach. However, given the declining position of classics and classical languages in modern society, some readers may feel, however mistakenly, that *Romantic Antiquity* overstates the centrality of Roman metaphors in Romantic culture through selective use of written sources. It may be that the book's thesis could have been better served by an injection of reception theory, stepping back from the texts themselves to consider the broader cultural role of classics and ancient languages as cornerstones of education and as markers of elite culture and national identity in the period.

Still, in addition to an extensive secondary bibliography, primary authors discussed in the book are numerous and varied. Authors used range from the iconic poets of the Romantic era to lesser-known popular dramatists like John Howard Payne and J. S. Knowles. Sachs moves between them, as well as jumping between texts, time-frames and historical examples, with a rapidity that might be disorientating were it not for the detailed contents page and clear use of sub-headings in the text. The result is a book which is

surprisingly easy to navigate and readily allows for both quick reference and more sustained reading. For students and scholars alike this work offers some refreshingly new ways of understanding the literary, cultural and historical indebtedness of the Romantic period to ancient Rome. By bringing together a vast array of authors, texts, genres, and illustrative examples, *Romantic Antiquity* is able to create an overarching impression of the centrality of Rome to the forging of a distinctive aesthetic in the Romantic period and for debating popular and political identities in a post-Waterloo world.

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