

GLADIATOR

AND THE MYTHS OF ROME



T.P. Wiseman looks at the development of the myth of ancient Rome, derived from the way its history has been seen.

RIDLEY SCOTT'S EPIC FILM *Gladiator* (2000) begins in AD 180, the last year of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. After the great battle in the German forest, the Roman commander Maximus and the emperor's son Commodus are talking to two senators called Gaius and Falco. (The purist winces. To introduce a man as 'Senator Gaius' is like calling Mr Blair 'Prime Minister Tony'.) Commodus warns Maximus that they will fill him full of ideas about a republic. 'Well, why not?' says Gaius, 'Rome was founded as a republic.' (The purist winces again. All seven kings forgotten? Ravished Lucretia died in vain if there was no tyrant to rebel against.) Commodus points out that in a republic, the Senate has the power. 'Where do you stand, General?' asks Falco, 'Emperor or Senate?' When Maximus tactfully avoids the question, Gaius comments 'With an army behind you, you could be extremely ... political.'

In real life, of course, well over a century after the last vain attempt to restore the Roman Republic had been snuffed out by the Praetorian Guard, such a conversation would have been unthinkable. Gaius' remark would have resulted in immediate arrest and execution for

Maximus in the arena, from *Gladiator*.

treason. However, the plot of the film requires that the Republic can be restored, and that Marcus Aurelius has a secret plan to restore it.

The old emperor has a final duty for Maximus: 'I want you to become the Protector of Rome after I die. I will empower you to one end alone, to give power back to the People of Rome...' (The word 'Protector' sug-

The Colosseum, of which Bede wrote 'while stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand; When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall; And when Rome falls, the world.'

gests that the story-writers had seventeenth-century England at the back of their minds. No one could have seriously asked 'Emperor or Senate?'



in AD 180, but in the 1640s 'King or Parliament?' was a real question.) At the end of the film the dying Maximus kills Commodus in the arena. His almost last words are 'There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realised. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius.' And as the senators carry his body out, we are left to assume that the People of Rome have got their power back.

What really happened in AD 193 was that Commodus was assassinated in a palace plot, and his successor, a senator called Pertinax, was murdered by the Praetorian Guard who then put the empire up for auction to the highest bidder. That makes a great story in the first volume of Edward Gibbon's history, and it is the culminating scene of Anthony Mann's 1964 film *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. As the camera tracks back from the outrageous auction ('Two million denars for the throne of Rome!'), a voice-over spells out the lesson for the audience:

This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire ... A great civilisation is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.

Gladiator is essentially a remake of the Mann film, but Ridley Scott's upbeat ending – the Republic, the wise old emperor's vision realised –



Members of the Praetorian Guard from the 2nd century AD, when they could make and unmake emperors.

could hardly be more different.

A cynic might say that Hollywood can no longer handle a message like Mann's. In twenty-first century America, the good guys get to win, whatever the history books may say. Besides, have the postmodernists not abolished the concept of historical fact?

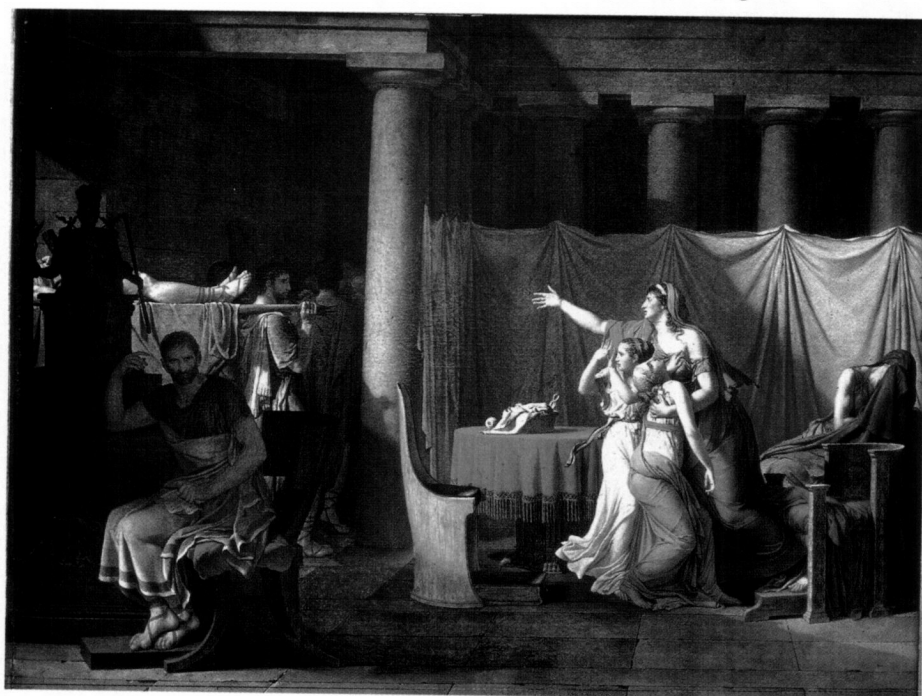
But that is not the only reason for *Gladiator's* plot line, and in my view not the most interesting either. Scott's film invites us to *admire* the Romans, not just look on them as an awful warning. Maximus is inspired by 'a dream that was Rome'. Marcus Aurelius wants to be remembered as 'the emperor who gave Rome back

her true self'. The tyranny of the emperors is not the real Rome. Here, however crudely, Hollywood has got it right.

The historian Florus, a contemporary of Marcus Aurelius, imagined the history of Rome as a human lifetime. Infancy was the time of the kings, youth and maturity were the Republic; under the emperors Rome is living out her old age. What the old emperor in the movie calls Rome's true self, what the historian thought of as her vigorous youth, was an age of heroic freedom-loving citizens whose memory was honoured in a long series of exemplary stories.

Lucius Brutus, who avenged the rape of Lucretia and led the rising that drove out Tarquin; Horatius Cocles, who held the bridge alone against an army and saved the city from slavery; Lucius Cincinnatus, summoned from the plough to hold command in a desperate crisis, who served the Republic and then returned to his farm; Marcus Curtius, who appeased the gods of the underworld by galloping into the chasm that threatened to engulf the city; Decius Mus, father and son, who on two occasions saved Rome from defeat by sacrificing their own lives; Marcus Regulus, who chose to return to torture and death in Carthage rather than break his word – these were the men whose stories inspired generations of Roman citizens to put the interests of the *res publica* (the 'common wealth') before their own.

When the Greek historian Polybius wanted to explain how Rome survived the catastrophic defeats inflicted on her by Hannibal in 217 and 216 BC, he came to the conclusion that it was not just down to her political stability and military



Jacques-Louis David's painting of the lictors bearing the bodies of his sons to Lucius Brutus. The sons had been condemned to death after plotting to restore the monarchy that Brutus had overthrown – a powerful republican myth for French revolutionaries such as David.



Sic transit... *The Romans of the Decadence* by Thomas Couture (1847), a moralistic comment on the decay of republican values painted as a comment on the dying regime of Louis-Philippe in France; and (right), Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), a film that covered the same moment in history as *Gladiator*, but drew very different conclusions.

organisation, but more because her young men were motivated by these exemplary tales 'to endure the extremes of suffering for the common good in the hope of winning the glory that waits upon the brave'.

Polybius also noted, with some surprise, that the Romans kept their oaths. That was because they believed in their gods, and honoured them scrupulously. Here too, a whole series of stories created and maintained their value-system. Jupiter himself had spoken to good king Numa, and given him the talisman shield from heaven that guaranteed the gods' favour to Rome. Castor and Pollux had fought for Rome in battle, and Mars too had appeared in person to inspire them. If ever the piety of holy men and women was doubted by sceptics, the gods could perform miracles to justify them, as when the augur Navius cut a whetstone in half with a razor, or the Vestal Virgin Tuccia carried water in a sieve.

All these stories claimed to be historical, and most of them could



be dated, from Lucius Brutus in 509 BC to Tuccia in 230. It is often said that the Romans had no mythology, but that view can only be justified on an arbitrarily restrictive definition of myth and history as mutually exclusive. Myths are stories that matter enough to a community to be told and retold generation after generation. They may be true, partly true, or wholly fictitious, but what's important is that they are believed. Whether or not we allow these Roman stories the title of 'mythology', they certainly functioned as

the defining myths of the community of Roman citizens.

Imperial wealth and arrogance corrupted the Roman Republic; avarice and ruthless lust for power came to characterise her ruling class, resulting in due course in the civil wars that brought the Republic down. The ideal – the myth – lived on, but in ironic contrast with the realities of Roman life. Autocracy returned, not kings this time but emperors, and by the turn of the millennium the men who were most important to the citizens of Rome

The legend of Romulus, Remus and the wolf was the foundational Roman myth. This bronze wolf is from c.500 BC; the boys were sculpted in the Renaissance.



were no longer the Tribunes of the People but the Prefects of the Praetorian Guard. With the coming of Christianity a new myth of Rome prevailed, as the paradigm of secular power, persecutors and crucifiers.

St Augustine in his *City of God* (fifth century AD) was still sensitive to the old stories of Roman heroism (he was a cultured man, who knew his Livy and his Virgil); but by then Christianity was the official religion of the Empire, and the myths that mattered to the community were those of the Church. It would take a thousand years for the ideals of republican civic virtue to be relevant again.

The first modern work of political

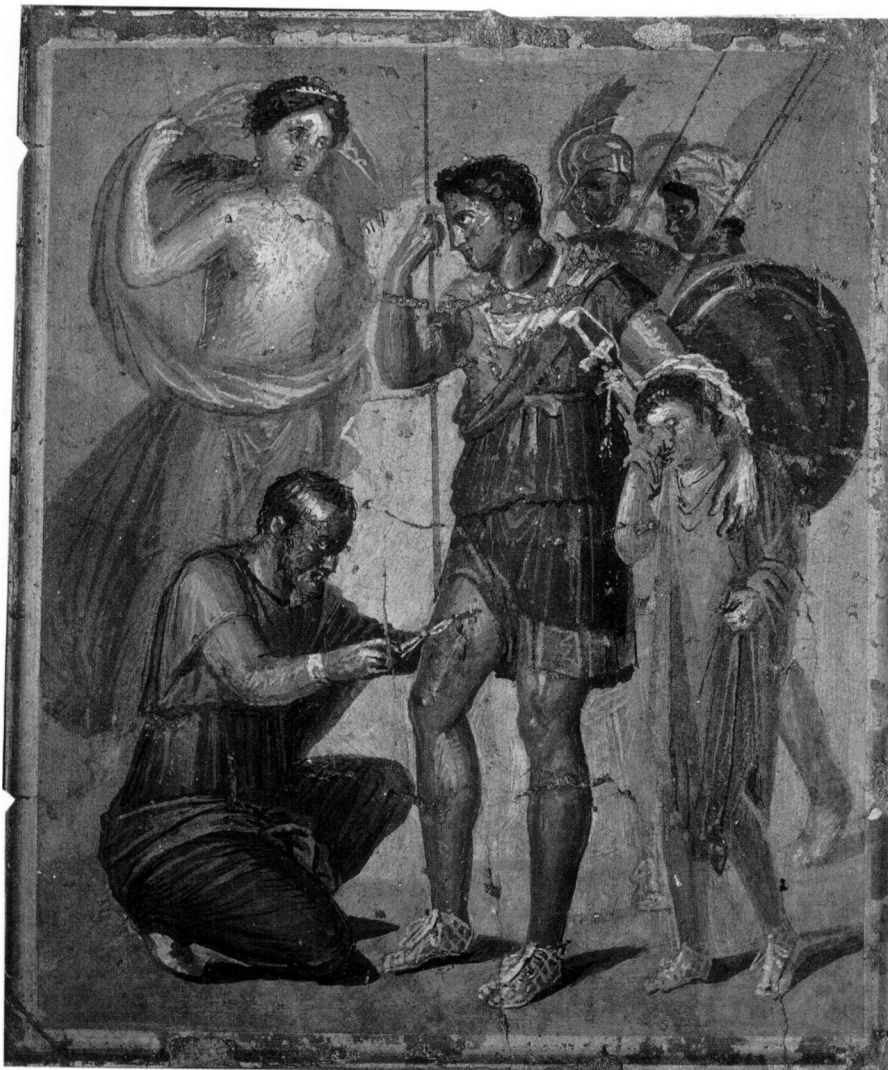
theory – written by a retired politician of the republic of Florence, Niccolò Machiavelli, and published posthumously in 1531 – took the form of a commentary on the early Roman Republic, as reported in the first ten books of Livy. The mythic heroes resumed their inspirational role, as citizens 'of such reputation

and exemplary behaviour that good men wish to imitate them and evil men are ashamed to lead a life contrary to theirs'; their example was as valuable to the republic as its laws and institutions.

No less significant for the early-modern reception of the myth of Rome was Jacques Amyot's 1559 translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, itself translated into English by Sir Thomas North in 1579, when Shakespeare was a boy. Plutarch wrote his lives with an explicit ethical motive: 'actions of virtue give the enquirer an admiration and an enthusiasm that leads him to imitate'. But he also included morally ambivalent subjects like Coriolanus and Antony, and in any case the most vivid of his Roman lives – the Gracchi, Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Antony again – are from the period of the Republic's collapse.

Add to that the sixteenth-century rediscovery of the first six books of Tacitus' *Annals* – that incomparable narrative of the hypocrisy and brutality of the post-republican regime, under the reluctant emperor Tiberius – and it is easy to see how the Romans became a favourite subject for playwrights exploring the great themes of liberty, tyranny and treason. Between 1599 to 1611, the London stage saw the production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, and Jonson's *Sejanus* and *Catiline*.

Meanwhile, Christopher Marlowe had translated the first book of Lucan's epic on the Roman civil war,



Aeneas, seen here wounded on a fresco from Pompeii, has remained a central figure for European imagination.

with its unforgettable portrait of a demonic Caesar as the destroyer of Roman freedom. A translation of Lucan was published in 1627 by Thomas May, who later served as Secretary to Parliament under the Commonwealth. The parallels with contemporary politics were complex (Caesar was like Cromwell, too); but they were inescapable, and exploited by both sides.

Oh happy age! Oh times like those alone
By Fate reserved for great Augustus' throne!

... was how John Dryden, in *Astraea Redux*, greeted the restoration of the monarchy.

There seemed little scope now – or even after 1688, when power was in the hands of an aristocratic oligarchy – for the memory of those heroic citizen soldiers of the early Republic, the ‘true self’ of Rome.

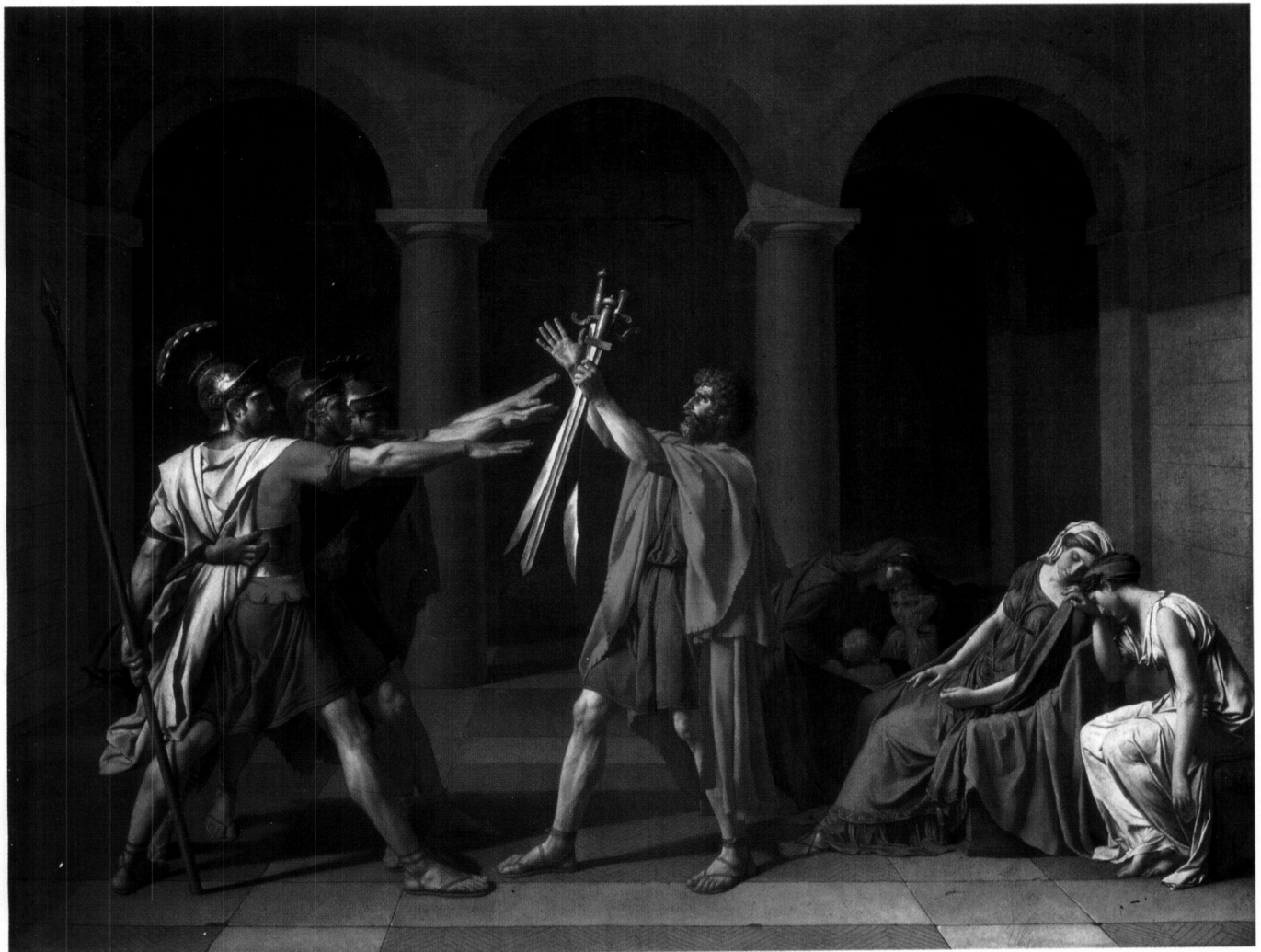


Roman history of every period has been reimagined by later artists, often for political purposes: above, the *Triumph of Caesar* painted in Mantua by Andrea Mantegna, painted in the late 15th century; below, the *Oath of the Horatii* by David (1784).

But their time would come again, with the revolutions that formed the modern world.

The republics of both America and France looked back to the early Romans. George Washington was ‘the Cincinnatus of the West’ even before Byron coined the phrase, and the bust of Lucius Brutus looked over the speakers’ rostrum of the National Convention in Paris from day one of the republic of 1792. Twelve years later, the self-coronation of Napoleon as emperor rendered Brutus’ example obsolete; and it is an interesting question how far the subsequent history of the United

States has been inspired by the ideals of Cincinnatus. But at least those stories were being used again. The memory of them was still alive – not least in England, as is shown by a splendid, and undeservedly



neglected, work of nineteenth-century English literature.

In 1842, eleven years after his great series of Commons speeches in favour of the Reform Bill, and six years before his *History of England* became a best-seller, Thomas Babington Macaulay published the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. Starting from the undeniable premise that the stories of early Rome in Livy's history display 'that peculiar character, more easily understood than defined, which distinguishes the creations of the imagination from the realities of the world in which we live', Macaulay adopted the theory of Perizonius and Niebuhr that the ultimate source of Livy's material had been oral songs and ballads. What had such songs been like in their original form? Scott's collection of *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* – and his own poems in that idiom, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion* – offered an irresistible analogy.

It is not improbable that, at the time when Cicero lamented the irreparable loss of the [oral] poems

One of H.R. Millar's illustrations of the Roman chapters of Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*.



mentioned by Cato, a search among the nooks of the Apennines, as active as the search which Sir Walter Scott made among the descendants of the mostroopers of Liddesdale, might have brought to light many fine remains of ancient minstrelsy. No such search was ever made. The Latin ballads perished for ever.

So Macaulay brought them back to life, in four poems: 'Horatius', 'The Battle of the Lake Regillus', 'Virginia' and 'The Prophecy of Capys'.

Like Scott, Macaulay was interested in the singer as much as the song. The performance of each of the 'Lays' is carefully positioned in time, and the performers, 'the ancient minstrels' as Macaulay put it, 'are in no wise above the passions and prejudices of their age and nation'. His own age had its passions and prejudices too. The *Lays* were published in the year the petition for the People's Charter was presented to Parliament for the second time, and for the second time rejected. 'Tribunes! We will have Tribunes!' The plebeians' attack on the arrogant patricians in *Virginia* must have sounded uncomfortably real to English readers in 1842.

The minstrel of *Horatius* looks back to when 'The Romans were like brothers/In the brave days of old', and his wonderful closing scenario shows how he and his creator want his story to be used:

And in the nights of winter,
When the cold north winds blow,
And the long howling of the wolves
Is heard amidst the snow;
When round the lonely cottage
Roars loud the tempest's din,
And the good logs of Algidus
Roar louder yet within;

When the oldest cask is opened,
And the largest lamp is lit;
When the chestnuts glow in the embers
And the kid turns on the spit;
When young and old in circle
Around the firebrands close;
When the girls are weaving baskets,
And the lads are shaping bows;

When the goodman mends his armour,
And trims his helmet's plume;
When the goodwife's shuttle merrily
Goes flashing through the loom;



French playwright Molière in the role of Caesar in the *Death of Pompey*, painted by Pierre Mignard (mid-17th century).

With weeping and with laughter
Still is the story told,
How well Horatius kept the bridge
In the brave days of old.

The snowstorm feels more like Liddesdale than the hills of Latium. But this idealised picture (the narrator's) within an idealised picture (Macaulay's) still provides a fine symbol of the long history of Roman myth, the 'dream that was Rome'.

By the time of Macaulay's death in 1859, republican heroism was fast becoming obsolete. The revolutionary movements of the 1840s were now a spent force. The Second French Republic had given way to the Second Empire of Napoleon III, and soon, in 1871, united Germany would become the Second Reich (the first had been Charlemagne's) under a Kaiser. Even in Britain, the constitutional monarch was made Empress of India – IND[iae] IMP[eratrix], as it said on the coins – by the Royal Titles Act of 1876. The Roman paradigm was now the empire of the Caesars.

Rudyard Kipling marks the change. Like Macaulay, he used Roman stories to inspire the young, as in the central chapters of *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), and like Macaulay he thought of them in a Walter Scott border landscape. In one of his poems, a centurion pleads with his commanding officer not to be sent back to Rome:

Let me work here for Britain's sake –
at any task you will –
A marsh to drain, a road to make or
native troops to drill,

Some Western camp (I know the Pict)
or granite Border keep,
Mid seas of heather derelict, where
our old messmates sleep.

Now, however, the call to duty was not for the defence of a free republic but for the consolidation of an empire.

Interestingly, it was a *falling* empire. 'The Roman Centurion's Song' has a dramatic date of AD 300, and the Roman chapters of *Puck of Pook's Hill* are set even later, in the time of the general Maximus (a Spaniard, like his namesake in *Gladiator*) who ruled Britain and Gaul in the 380s AD. Kipling's hero knows that the Wall will not keep out the barbarians for long, just as Kipling himself knew – and reminded the readers of *The Times* in his poem 'Recessional' (1897) – that the British Empire too would soon be 'one with Nineveh and Tyre'.

Not everyone admired the Roman Empire as Kipling did. The more orthodox attitude, derived from the New Testament, saw the Empire as the despotic enemy of Christianity. That was the premise of Henryk Sienkiewicz's hugely successful novel *Quo Vadis?*, published in 1896, which in the next generation reached an even greater audience via the cinema. Here is the opening voice-over of the 1951 version:

That any force on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of power and corruption, of human misery and slavery, seems inconceivable. But thirty years before this day, a miracle occurred. On a Roman cross in Judaea, a man died to make men free, to spread the gospel of love and redemption. Soon that humble cross was destined to replace the proud eagles that now top the victorious Roman standards. This is the story of that immortal conflict.

So powerful was this view of Rome that even Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) had to take account of it. Of course there are no Christians in a story set in 73 BC; and Howard Fast's original novel had had an explicitly Marxist message, looking forward to when 'Rome would be torn down ... by slaves and serfs and peasants'. Yet,

Peter Ustinov as Nero in the 1951 film of *Quo Vadis?*, which presented Rome as the enemy of Christianity.

the voice-over for Spartacus sets the scene 'in the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity, which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome, and bring about a new society'.

Forty years on, when the tradition of Hollywood Roman epics was revived, such pious orientation of the audience would have seemed very old-fashioned. There is no voice-over in *Gladiator*, and though the conversation with Gaius and Falco does the same job, the polarities are not now tyranny and Christianity, but tyranny and the Republic. A pagan hero is no longer a problem: Maximus does not have to be redeemed by conversion. What he does – after a fashion – is recall the Romans to their own great tradition as a free people. In its way, grossly unhistorical though it is, *Gladiator* is true to the myths of Rome.

T.P. Wiseman is the author of *The Myths of Rome* (University of Exeter Press, 2004).

FOR FURTHER READING

T.P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (U. of Exeter Press, 2004); Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Blackwell, 2004); Catharine Edwards (ed.), *Roman Presences. Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945* (Cambridge UP, 1999); Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Blackwell, 1997); Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

FROM THE HISTORY TODAY ARCHIVE

Keith Hopkins, 'Murderous Games: Gladiatorial Contests in Ancient Rome' (June 1983); John North, 'Democracy in Rome' (March 1994); John M. Carter, 'Augustus Down the Centuries' (March 1983); Stuart Andrews, 'Classicism and the American Revolution' (January 1987); Roy Porter, 'Gibbon, the Secular Scholar' (September 1986); Anthony Lentin, 'Edward Gibbon and The Golden Age of the Antonines' (July 1981); Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, 'The Survival of the Eastern Roman Empire' (Nov 98). For access to these and other articles see www.historytoday.com and click on Editor's Choice.



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