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1

The Victorians and the Ancient World

In the nineteenth century both Britain and the United States were obsessed with the Ancient World. For the Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic history held the key to understanding the present and the eternal truths about human nature. The Ancient World could be used to represent an escape from an increasingly urbanized and industrialized present to an idealized golden age. It could constitute a vehicle to critique the present. It fulfilled a continuing nineteenth-century taste for the exotic, for spectacle and for education. It could be used to explore the roots of national, communal, individual and gender identity.

The American Founding Fathers consciously saw themselves as the successors of the heroes of the Republic and modelled their institutions, their buildings and their rhetoric on those of Ancient Rome.¹ The classical myths, suitably sanitized, were retold for American children by writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Thomas Bulfinch. They provided inspiration for painters and sculptors such as Henry Peters Gray and William Page. William Wetmore Story wrote a series of dramatic monologues as delivered by Phidias, Praxiteles, Marcus Aurelius, Cleopatra, Mark Antony and Cassandra, a play *Nero* and made sculptures of Cleopatra, Medea, Salome, Helen, Alcestis, Clytemnestra, Judith, Electra and Semiramis. American statesmen such as Washington, Jackson and Calhoun were depicted wearing togas. One of the most popular plays on the early American stage was the Englishman Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1713), which eulogized one of the greatest heroes of the Republic. Plays by American authors adopted Addison's approach and attitude. Republican heroes inspired for instance John Howard Payne's *Brutus or the Fall of Tarquin* (1818), and Jonas B. Phillips's *Camillus or the Self-Exiled Patriot* (1833). But the most celebrated nineteenth-century Ancient World drama was Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831), which

retained its popularity in America for seventy years. It told the story of the rebel gladiator Spartacus and his revolt against Rome. In this context, Rome was seen as the analogue of the British Empire and Spartacus as the counterpart of the American colonists whose rebellion ended imperial rule. The role became particularly associated with the American actor Edwin Forrest and when he played it at Drury Lane in 1836, *John Bull* (20 November 1836) reported: 'his fine manly form, great physical force and exceeding energy, were in admirable keeping with our preconceived notions of a Gladiator . . . At times we forgot the actor and fancied that one of the glorious statues of ancient Greece had been suddenly called into life and summoned to the arena.' However there was a perceived shift in the later nineteenth century from these celebrations of secular democratic republicanism to evocations of Christian resistance to imperial tyranny. This would be directly reflected on the stage. Interestingly the same trajectory occurred in the British theatre. The context in Britain was the political and cultural transformation of the country.

The period between the 1770s and the 1830s was one of profound upheaval and disturbance in Britain. When British forces surrendered to the rebel American colonists at Yorktown in 1781, the band played 'The World Turned Upside Down'. This must have been how many of those living through these decades felt. The American and French revolutions not only overthrew long-established social and political orders, they undermined long-held assumptions and attitudes. In Britain radical and democratic groups began pressing for root and branch reform, a movement leading eventually to the 1832 Reform Act which began the process of opening up parliament, first to middle-class and later to working-class participation in the political process. At the same time the Industrial Revolution was transforming a largely rural society into a mainly urban one, with all the consequent social problems, and the Age of Enlightenment, in which reason and common sense prevailed, when science was believed to provide rational explanations for everything and when an ordered, measured classicism prevailed in the arts, was overthrown by the rise of Romanticism, the intellectual and artistic counterpart of the political and economic upheavals. Romanticism had at its roots a burning desire for freedom from restraint and the unshackling of the imagination. It had certain basic fascinations: the past, especially the medieval past, the cult of naturalism and spontaneity, heroic individualism and the occult. Romanticism had two manifestations, reactionary and radical, but what both had in common was the feeling of being an outsider which led, for reactionaries, to the celebration of the past as a rebuke to the present, and for radicals, to the

desire to overthrow the existing order of things and implement an idealized blueprint for a Utopian society dedicated to liberty, equality and fraternity.

However, the Victorian age, which began with the accession of the eighteen-year-old Queen Victoria in 1837, marked a decisive break with the disreputable and discredited Hanoverian monarchs of the previous two decades, and her long reign was to witness the increasing unification of Britain and a moral transformation of society.

There remained considerable diversity within the British Isles. Scotland retained its own legal, educational and banking systems, for instance. The Anglican Church was the established Church of England and Wales, though Dissent dominated within Wales; in Scotland, the Presbyterian Church was dominant. Even within England, there was a north-south division, as indeed there still is, and London remained a huge, unique, separate entity, almost another world. Regional dialects were spoken in different parts of the country, so much so, for instance, that Geordie music-hall comedians could not be understood in the south and Cockneys had problems in the north, partly because they spoke too fast and switched their v's and w's.

Nevertheless, a British unity emerged that was perfectly compatible with diversity. Pride in local dialect literature, in local regiments, in local, regional, civic and provincial identity, not only survived but flourished, and was perfectly consonant with pride in the British nation and empire, because of the Britishness of key elements. The political system was national. The political parties (Liberal and Conservative, later joined by Labour) were specifically constructed and projected as national British parties. Successive Scots led the Liberal Party (Gladstone, Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman) and the Tories (Balfour, Bonar Law). Wales became a bastion of Liberalism and later Labourism, channelling its sense of identity not into political separation but into official opposition and, indeed, government, when a Welshman, Lloyd George, became Prime Minister. Parliament was the embodiment of the Whig theory of history, of the gradual and inexorable evolution of democracy, the recognition and incorporation of Catholics, Jews, the working classes and women into the body politic and the operation of political parties that were cross-class and transnational.

In the nineteenth century the railways unified Britain as never before, imposing a national time standard and making possible a national diet, national newspapers, national sporting leagues. The empire transcended national differences and became supranational, with the English, Irish, Scots and Welsh alike serving in the British Imperial Army, Ireland

providing colonial viceroys and governors, and the empire being seen as distinctively British rather than specifically English. The monarchy came to embody the whole nation. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert shared a well-publicized love for the Highlands, building Balmoral Castle and spending summer holidays there, and the royal princes wore kilts. The eldest son of the monarch was the Prince of Wales, and Lloyd George devised a fake antique ceremony for the installation of the future Edward VIII as Prince of Wales in order to emphasize the Welsh identity within the imperial British context. All the royal princes were given titles that emphasized Britishness – Queen Victoria's sons were the Prince of Wales, the Dukes of Edinburgh and Albany representing Scotland, and the Duke of Connaught representing Ireland. Regular royal visits to all parts of the British Isles stressed the role of the monarch as a unifying factor.

A genuinely British culture emerged. Many of the leading Victorian gurus – Ruskin, Carlyle, Samuel Smiles, Edward Irving – were Scots. Scots were nationally prominent in journalism, publishing, medicine and science. At the same time, all parts of the British Isles revered Dickens, Scott and Shakespeare.

Not only did a unified culture emerge but a strongly structured and regulated society – orderly, law-abiding and deferential. There were a number of contributing factors: the growth of the factory system which instilled punctuality, regularity and discipline and of large-scale organizations like the railways and the Post Office which enforced military-style discipline and uniformed their employees; the work of the police force and the courts; a general improvement in the quality of life (health, housing, transport, civic amenities); the socializing effects of schools and Sunday schools on the young and of chapel, trade unions and adult education movements on their elders; and, above all, the pervasive power of the doctrine of respectability at all levels of society.

The definition of the national character was completed, in the nineteenth century, by the fusion of two powerful creeds. The first was Evangelical Protestantism, the dominant social ethic of the first half of the nineteenth century. The Evangelicals, characterized by an intense seriousness of purpose, immense industry and enthusiastic missionary spirit, censorious highmindedness and a puritanical abstention from worldly pleasures, mounted a full-scale and successful assault on every level and aspect of society, promoting philanthropy, religion, education, duty and hard work, and attacking cruelty, frivolity and vice in all its forms.

It was Evangelical activists who ensured the civilizing of a violent, disorderly society by banning the slave trade and public executions, outlawing cruel sports such as bull-baiting, cock-fighting and bare-knuckle prizefighting, by restricting gambling and drinking, by abolishing the national lottery, by imposing a puritanical code of sexual conduct and inculcating the ideas of duty, service and conscience, thrift, sobriety and personal restraint. Taught in schools and Sunday schools, promoted in literature and enshrined in law, these ideas became the British national values while the predominant Protestantism of Wales and Scotland ensured that they were accepted there as much as in England.

At the same time, there was a revival of chivalry, which became all-pervasive in the nineteenth century. Inspired by Sir Walter Scott's idealizations of the Middle Ages, chivalry was deliberately promoted by such key figures of the age as Ruskin and Carlyle to provide a code of life for the young, based on the virtues of the gentleman: courtesy, bravery, modesty, purity and compassion, and a sense of responsibility towards women, children, the weak and the helpless. It permeated the literature and painting of the period, was advocated by youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Boys' Brigade, enshrined in the codes and regulations of sports like football and cricket and embodied in the public school ethos (fair play, team spirit, modesty, loyalty) absorbed not just by public schoolboys but by schoolboys everywhere through popular fictions from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* to the Greyfriars stories in *The Magnet*. The idea of the gentleman was an integrative image for the ruling elites of Great Britain, once again transcending the boundaries between England, Scotland and Wales, and percolating down from the elite to the rest of the population through popular culture. It was seen as a counterweight to the selfishness, greed and individualism of raw capitalism, and as a vehicle for service and social concern. Evangelicalism and chivalry thus became the distinctive shaping social and ideological forces of the nineteenth century. Each fed into a political party: Evangelicalism into Liberalism, chivalry into Conservatism.

The two ideologies cross-fertilized to provide a justification for an empire that had been acquired for economic, strategic and political reasons. The Evangelical missionary impulse, the desire to bring the heathen to the light of God, and the Calvinist idea of the elect, the British as the greatest nation in the world obliged to provide justice and good government for inferior races, intertwined with a chivalric vision of empire as a vehicle for young Englishmen to demonstrate the virtues that made them gentlemen. This confluence inspired a continuing theme in imperial writing, the idea that the British ran their empire not for their

own benefit but for the benefit of those they ruled. What these ideologies had in common was the overwhelming importance of the ideas of personal restraint and concern for others, of duty and service. Merged together, they helped form the national character and national ideology.

The two ancient cultures which appealed most to Victorian Britain were Greece and Rome. Antiquity, particularly Ancient Greece, with its classical architecture characterized by rational, balanced and geometric designs, the invention of democracy, a philosophy based on ethics and reason and an aesthetics that celebrated perfect beauty inspired the apostles and exponents of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The cult of Hellenism was central to the intellectual life of Victorian Britain. Writers and thinkers selected from the Greek heritage those elements which most closely conformed to the preoccupations of the age, essentially celebrating the Ancient Greeks as proto-Victorians. What the Victorians highlighted was the Greeks' development of democracy and the rule of law, at a time when democracy was being extended in Britain, and the Greek appreciation of beauty and celebration of heroism as a contrast to the philistinism and Nonconformist Puritanism associated with the bourgeoisie. They rejoiced in the philosophical humanism which they derived from study of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates and from which they took intellectual justification for collective social responsibility, individual self-sacrifice, devotion to duty and enlightened paternalism which was seen, like chivalry, as a corrective to the materialism and selfishness associated with industrial capitalism. Ancient Greece, in particular Periclean Athens, was idealized and held up as a model of dignity, decency, restraint, moderation, harmony, balance, reason and purity. Homer was studied as a secular equivalent of the Bible. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were seen in particular as teaching chivalry, nobility, patriotism, and moral and physical strength as characteristics for which to strive. So the language, literature, history and ideas of the Ancient Greeks were taught to the British elite at school and at university to fit them to cope with the modern world.²

If Ancient Greece appealed to the intellectuals and artists of Victorian Britain, Ancient Rome appealed to its administrators and empire-builders. For Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, already master of the mightiest empire the world had ever seen, the reference point for comparison, for guidance, for lessons was the Roman Empire. Anthony Trollope observed in 1870 that Rome and the Roman Empire were part of modern history and modern political life in a way that Greece could never be.³ Where Rome had the *Pax Romana*, Britain had the *Pax Britannica* with much the same remit. Britain referred to

its imperial viceroys as 'proconsuls'. The architecture of the empire tended to favour the classical style in its public buildings. The utterances of Britain's imperial statesmen were steeped in classical allusion, most famously when in a debate about the manhandling of a British subject Don Pacifico, Lord Palmerston proclaimed as a fundamental of British policy, the protection at all costs of British subjects with the ringing statement '*Civis Romanus sum*'. Disraeli, defining his policy, declared it to be *imperium et libertas*, Empire and Freedom. The British admired the Romans for their stoicism, their courage, their administration and their legal system, their concept of citizenship, their straight roads, bridges and aqueducts, their common currency and common language. In Britain, Hadrian's Wall, the Roman roads, and the archaeological remains at Bath, Colchester and St Albans were a permanent reminder of Roman architectural achievements. The regular comparisons between the British and Roman empires culminated in detailed comparative studies: Lord Cromer's *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (1910) – significantly Cromer was both Britain's proconsul in Egypt and later President of the Classical Association, Sir Charles Lucas's *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (1912) and Sir James Bryce's *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India* (1914). Just as the prospective elite of the empire were taught Greek, they were also taught Latin and provided with inspiring examples of dedication, duty and service from Roman history, notably in Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), a popular poetic retelling of four episodes from Roman history, regularly learned by heart by Victorian schoolboys of all classes. The Roman poets Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil and Horace were as much a part of nineteenth-century culture as were the Greek poets and philosophers.⁴

However, Britain did not just look to Rome for laudatory parallels; it looked to Rome also for lessons about what destroys empires and this was a source of much reflection, thought and argument. A classic example of this is to be found in *The Roman and the Teuton*, a series of inaugural lectures given by the Reverend Charles Kingsley on his appointment as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge and published in 1864. He begins by painting a lurid picture of the Roman Empire in the later fourth century, an empire under the absolute rule of an emperor, whose palace is 'a sink of corruption', where the Senate only exists to carry out the orders of the tyrant, where the free middle classes have either disappeared or linger on 'too proud to labour, fed on government bounty, and amused by government spectacles', where the arts and science have died, where everything is done by an army of slaves supplied by a cruel and degrading slave trade and where the

normal condition of the empire is one of 'revolt, civil war, invasion'. 'And yet', says Kingsley, 'they called themselves Christians – to whom it has been said "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For these things cometh the wrath of God on the children of disobedience".' The wrath did come and the empire fell. So the absence of true spirituality, of real Christianity, is the root cause of the fall of the Roman Empire. This picture, he warned, could be repeated in the British Empire 'if we are not careful'.⁵

For Kingsley the key factors in Rome's decline and the ones to be avoided by the British Empire if it was to escape the same fate were the absence of parliamentary democracy and a responsible aristocracy, the existence of slavery, the decay of public spirit, civic virtue and morality, the dominance of sensuality, the employment of mercenaries, the decline of racial purity and the absence of genuine Christianity. For Kingsley, as for many other commentators from Ruskin to Kipling, the last of these was the most significant. In the nineteenth century, which saw a major revival in Britain of both Evangelicalism and Catholicism, the role of Christianity in the Roman Empire became a major subject of debate.

Major religious polemicists took to the novel to work out their debates about the nature of the faith and, writing as they were during the heyday of the British Empire, they often set their debates during the Roman Empire. Of whatever persuasion, they were as one in the belief that the most potent force to deploy against the paganism, slavery, unrestrained sensuality and political despotism of the empire was Christianity.

The fashion for Roman novels essentially began with Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and climaxed with General Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880) and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?* (1896), novels by an Englishman, an American and a Pole respectively, but all hugely popular best-sellers worldwide, endlessly reprinted, translated and adapted for and performed on the stage and, during the twentieth century, in the cinema. An estimated 200 novels on Roman life were written by British and American authors between the 1820s and the First World War.⁶ In most of these novels, Christianity was seen as the answer to the tyranny and corruption of a pagan empire. In general terms then it was possible to argue that without a genuinely felt and practised Christianity empire will fail. For Christianity is seen here to be synonymous with democracy, humanity and public virtue. But it was on the question of what kind of Christianity – Catholic or Protestant – that the nineteenth-century novelists crossed swords. Charles Kingsley published his novel *Hypatia* in 1853. It recounted the religious clashes in fifth-century

Alexandria, highlighting the theological disputes and divisions weakening the empire. Kingsley lays the blame on hysterical, celibate, neurotic and fanatical monks, who are his analogue of the Catholics, and on scheming politico bishops in a theocratic state; his Bishop Cyril of Alexandria is a thinly-disguised picture of Cardinal Wiseman, leader of the English Catholics. His heroes, the monk Philammon and the Jew Raphael Aben-Ezra, are converted to his preferred model of Christianity, a simple proto-Protestant Christianity, which Kingsley calls 'the only real democratic creed'. Kingsley was one of the pioneers of 'muscular Christianity', was strongly opposed to priestly elitism, celibacy and popery and was an enthusiastic advocate of marriage for members of the clergy. As a direct response to Kingsley's novel both Cardinal Wiseman and John Henry Newman, later himself a cardinal, also wrote extremely influential novels. Wiseman's *Fabiola* was published in 1854 and Newman's *Callista* in 1855. The former is set in Rome in 302 and the latter in North Africa in 250, but both commemorate the Christian martyrs of the Roman persecutions of those periods and in particular write up, celebrate and affirm Catholic beliefs and practices, such as the cult of the saints and the papal hierarchy. Kingsley, Newman and Wiseman all see the Roman Empire as synonymous with decay, despotism and sensuality and Christianity as its salvation, but as the cure for sensuality, Newman and Wiseman prescribe celibacy and Kingsley monogamous marriage. Where Newman and Wiseman prescribe a strong hierarchical Catholic Church, Kingsley argues for proto-Protestant individualism. These are only three of the torrent of novels dealing with the conflict of Christianity and Empire in ancient Rome. This conflict and its working out in Christianity's favour made these novels as appealing to the American audience as to the British.⁷

Then towards the end of the century other concerns arose to parallel the debate about spirituality in the empire. There was anxiety about manpower shortages and the degeneration of the race when the Boer War revealed a third of all recruits to be physically unfit to serve and there was panic about the decadent movement and in particular the celebrity of Oscar Wilde and Wildeanism. This inspired disapproving descriptions of sensuality in the novels of the time, linked to the gospel of Wildeanism, and visually half-horrified, half-fascinated paintings such as Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) in which the debauched emperor Heliogabalus and his decadent companions watch with world-weary amusement while his dinner guests are smothered to death beneath a torrent of rose petals released from a canopy above them.

There was a widespread sense of crisis in intellectual and elite circles, a crisis which produced such works as Elliot Mills's best-selling work of 'future history', *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (1905) which attributed the decline to 'town life, demoralizing luxury, physical inertia, gradual decline in physique and health and lack of confidence in the imperial mission'.⁸ Sir Robert Baden-Powell founded the Boy Scouts partly to prevent the British Empire suffering the same decline as the Roman, a decline he attributed in *Scouting for Boys* (1908) to the abandonment of soldiering, manliness and patriotism.

The characteristics of the Ancient World novel were essentially set by its progenitor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, later the first Lord Lytton, novelist, poet and statesman, in his phenomenally successful *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which was the product of visits to the ruined city in 1832–33. Pompeii, an otherwise unremarkable Roman provincial town, was made immortal by its destruction along with neighbouring Herculaneum in AD 79 by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius and its rediscovery by archaeologists seventeen centuries later.

It was the chance discovery in 1711 of stone fragments by a peasant digging a well that led to systematic excavations on the site of Herculaneum by the kings of the Two Sicilies. The much richer neighbouring site of Pompeii was only identified in 1763 and it was not until 1863 that systematic, scientific excavation began there with the appointment of a trained archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli as Director of the Museum and Excavations. Long before this, however, the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum had become a regular port of call for travellers on the Grand Tour. Goethe, Dickens, Dumas and Mark Twain visited them. But the most productive visit was that of Bulwer-Lytton, for it directly inspired *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Lady Blessington typically declared of the book: 'There is more true poetry in your Pompeii than in fifty epics, and it alone would stamp its author as the genius *par excellence* of our day ... it is read and praised by all classes alike, each expressing surprise that so powerful an interest can be excited for so remote an age.'⁹

Lytton's fictional plot centred on Glaucus, an Athenian resident of Pompeii, and his love for the beautiful Ione. But Ione is also loved by her guardian, Arbaces, the High Priest of Isis. Arbaces murders Ione's brother, Apaecides, a priest of Isis who has converted to Christianity, and frames Glaucus for the murder. Glaucus is condemned to the arena but as he is facing the lions, another priest, Calenus, reveals that he witnessed the murder and Glaucus is innocent. At this point, Vesuvius erupts. Various characters, among them Arbaces and Calenus, are killed. But Glaucus

and Ione are saved by the blind slave-girl Nydia, who loves Glaucus. She leads them safely through the smoke and the darkness to a ship which carries them to safety. Having selflessly united the lovers, Nydia drowns herself in the sea. Glaucus and Ione marry and settle in Athens.

The action of the novel takes place amid precisely described locations uncovered by archaeologists; the Pompeian amphitheatre, the villa of the tragic poet, the villa of Diomedes and the temple of Isis. Declaring himself with regard to prose fiction ‘thoroughly aware of its power in teaching as well as amusing’, Lytton sought to give a faithful picture of the customs, costume and superstitions of the age, an accurate topography of his setting but also ‘a just representation of the human passions and the human heart, whose elements in all ages are the same’.¹⁰ Together with his detailed historical research and his exploration of the secrets of the human heart there was another powerful inspiration – painting. While he was in Italy, Lytton visited a collection of pictures in the Brera Gallery in Milan and wrote in his journal that one picture in particular was making a ‘considerable sensation’. The painting *The Last Days of Pompeii* was by the Russian artist Karl Pavlovich Bryulov (1799–1852) and set a series of ‘human interest’ stories against an apocalyptic background. Lytton said:

This picture is full of genius, imagination and nature. The faces are fine, the conception grand. The statues toppling from a lofty gate have a crashing and awful effect. But the most natural touch is an infant in its mother’s arms – her face impressed with a dismay and terror which partake of the sublime; the child wholly unconscious of the dread event – stretching its arms towards a bird of gay plumage that lies upon the ground struggling in death, and all the child’s gay delighted wonder is pictured in its face. This exception to the general horror of the scene is full of pathos, and in the true contrast of fine thought.¹¹

The impression this picture made upon Bulwer-Lytton was reinforced by another. One of John Martin’s epic canvases, exhibited at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly in 1822, was *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Lytton knew and admired Martin’s work, calling him in 1833 ‘the greatest, the most lofty, the most permanent, the most original genius of his age. I see in him . . . the presence of a . . . great soul lapped in majestic and unearthly dreams.’¹²

In its turn the novel inspired painters. An estimated thirty-five paintings based on episodes in the novel are recorded in the sixty years

after its appearance, among them Paul Falconer Poole's *The Destruction of Pompeii* (c. 1835) and *The Escape of Glaucus and Ione, with the Blind Girl Nydia from Pompeii* (1861) and Joseph Severn's *The Witches' Cavern: Glaucus and Ione* (1840). The American sculptor Randolph Rogers sculpted *Nydia the Blind Girl of Pompeii*.¹³ The paintings, like the novel, embodied the characteristics which were to become identified with the Ancient World genre: archaeological authenticity, emotional truth, visual power and a desire to educate as well as to entertain. The same characterizations were to be carried over into stage adaptations of the major novels.

The nineteenth century was the period in which archaeology emerged as a science – the word only came into common currency in 1851 – and the recovery of the Ancient World proceeded apace in Italy, Greece, Egypt and the Near East. The Elgin Marbles had been sent from Athens to London between 1801 and 1811, creating a sensation. But it was not until the 1860s that digging began at Olympia and Samothrace to recover the remains of Ancient Greece. In 1879 the British School of Archaeology in Athens was established and in 1885 Oxford University established a chair of Classical Archaeology. It was, however, the German Heinrich Schliemann who had made the most sensational discoveries in Greece. Schliemann, fantasist, romantic, self-publicist and pioneering archaeologist, in the twenty years following 1870 astonished the world with his finds at Troy, Mycenae and Tiryns, which appeared to confirm the literal truth of the events related by Homer and the Ancient Greek playwrights.

The siege of Troy is one of the great epics of European culture, with its parade of heroes (Hector, Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Aeneas and Paris) and its succession of mythic events (the judgement of Paris, the abduction of Helen, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the Wooden Horse). It has inspired great writers and artists down the years from Homer, Aeschylus and Virgil through Chaucer and Shakespeare to Berlioz and Yeats. Caesar and Alexander both visited the putative site of Troy. Fugitive Trojans were said to have founded Rome, France and even Britain. But did the Trojan War actually ever happen? Some of the greatest classical scholars have doubted it. George Grote, premier historian of Ancient Greece in the nineteenth century, dismissed it as a legend in 1846. This view is still held by some today. Sir Moses Finley argued that 'Homer's War, the war of the poems and of the tradition, is a timeless event floating in a timeless world.'¹⁴ But the search for Troy is one of the great romances of modern archaeology. It was an Englishman Frank Calvert who decisively identified Hisarlik in modern Turkey as the site of Ancient Troy

and suggested it to Schliemann. Between 1870 and 1890 when he died Schliemann returned regularly to the site, proving beyond doubt the existence of a city of Troy. It was in 1873 that he uncovered what he dubbed 'the treasure of Priam' and 'the jewels of Helen'. But before his death it had become clear that there was not one Troy but seven successive cities built on the same site and his discoveries came from Troy II, whose remains dated from a thousand years before the putative time of Homer's Trojan War. Schliemann's assistant Wilhelm Dorpfeld, who continued the excavations after Schliemann's death, thought that Troy VI was probably Homeric Troy, an identification which still holds true today. Supplementary evidence for a Trojan War emerged later not from Greek sources but from the discovery and decipherment of the diplomatic archive of the Hittite Empire whose documents suggest that Troy may have been a vassal state of the Hittites and that an attack on it in the thirteenth century BC by the Greeks as part of a wider clash of empires over dominance on the coast of Asia Minor is therefore entirely plausible.¹⁵

It was Schliemann who also excavated Mycenae, a uniquely preserved example of a Bronze Age fortress city. The walls, the tombs, the Lion Gate and the so-called Treasury of Atreus were all known sites and regularly visited by curious travellers from the eighteenth century onwards when interest in pagan antiquities revived. In 1876 Schliemann uncovered five graves full of treasures, including gold face masks, one of which Schliemann confidently proclaimed to be the mask of Agamemnon. Later this was dated to the sixteenth century BC, long before the age of Agamemnon. The building identified as Agamemnon's Palace turned out not to be and the Treasury of Atreus was actually a beehive-shaped tomb. Although Mycenae did not yield evidence relating to Troy, Schliemann's discoveries and his published accounts in the books *Mycenae*, *Ilios* and *Tiryns* enthralled a generation. It was such discoveries that inspired writers with a passion for accurate descriptions of the places, customs, costume and artefacts of the Ancient World. They provided equal inspiration for painters, whose work came first to fix the image of the Ancient World in the popular mind.

John Martin (1789–1854) was the master of 'the apocalyptic sublime'. His huge canvases which combined immensity of scale, intricacy of detail and an overpowering atmosphere appealed powerfully to the nineteenth-century sensibility, a sensibility shaped by the world-changing experiences of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. He painted visions of cosmic catastrophe drawn both from the Ancient World and the Bible. Among them were *The Fall*

of *Babylon* (1819), *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821), *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822), *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (1824), *The Fall of Nineveh* (1829), *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host* (1833), *The Deluge* (1834) and *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852). They were to influence the great epic film-makers of the twentieth century, D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille. But Martin was not alone. Similar pictures were painted by J.M.W. Turner, David Roberts, Samuel Colman, Francis Danby, George Miller and Thomas Cole. Martin's influence was at its height in the early 1830s, coinciding exactly with the vogue for Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*. As Martin's biographer William Feaver puts it:

Martin's special contribution was to popularize and make immediate vanished civilizations. While offering little or nothing in terms of original research, he turned literary references into visual reality... he concentrated on architectural heroics – the immense promenades, viaducts, canals, and sewers which had been commonplace, it appeared, in the ancient Egyptian and Babylonian empires... There were few precedents in fine art for this brand of panoramic epic painting... he made no serious attempt to represent these cities as they had actually appeared, but showed them instead as sublimely inauthentic permanent stage sets... the neo-classical taste for accurate reconstruction of an exemplary, awe-inspiring past... was propagated by way of theatre design, panoramas, and architecture. These are the frames of reference with which Martin's epic 'machines' truly belong – not among the conventional history paintings of the academy.¹⁶

When Martin was painting, *Babylon* and *Nineveh* had yet to be excavated and when excavations revealed Martin's views to be essentially fanciful, he fell out of popularity, following his death in 1854. Accuracy became the watchword for history painting.

Typical of the new school of painters of the *Ancient World* was Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Gérôme was a leading figure in the group, dubbed by contemporaries *Néo-Grecs*. Inspired by archaeological excavations at Pompeii and elsewhere, the *Néo-Grecs* were animated by enthusiasm for depicting scenes of everyday life in accurate antique settings furnished with authentic artefacts. Two of Gérôme's most enduring and influential pictures were his paintings of the arena, *Ave Caesar, Morituri te Salutant* (1859) showing a group of gladiators saluting the emperor, and *Pollice Verso* (1872) showing a gladiator straddling a fallen

opponent and waiting for the thumbs up or thumbs down sign from the crowd. Feeling that some of the archaeological detail in *Ave Caesar* was incorrect, he studied costumes on Trajan's column and had moulds made from gladiators' helmets, greaves and buckles from Naples. He made several bronze statues of gladiators in 1875 and 1878. Other canvases included *Cleopatra before Caesar* (1866), *Julius Caesar and his Staff* (1863) and *Death of Caesar* (1867), showing Caesar dead beneath Pompey's statue and the senators fleeing. Later in the century he painted *Circus Maximus* (1876) showing chariots racing round a central spina and *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer* (1883) with a huddled group of Christians in the circus as lions emerge from an underground tunnel. Both were commissioned by wealthy Americans and displayed in America. They look to have directly influenced the visuals in the films *Ben-Hur* and *The Sign of the Cross*. Gérôme's ancient world scenes were familiar through their mass reproduction in engravings both in Britain and America.¹⁷

In Britain a classical revival in painting, celebrating the civilizations and values of Greece and Rome, lasted from the 1860s to 1914. According to Christopher Wood in his authoritative *Olympian Dreamers*, Victorian classicism is not easy to define. 'Inevitably it meant different things to different people; it was an influence rather than a coherent body of opinion; a catalyst rather than a clearly defined artistic movement.' In support of this view, he differentiates the characteristics of the leading classical painters: 'the lofty aspirations of Leighton, the antiquarianism of Alma-Tadema, the aesthetic classicism of Moore and Burne-Jones, the decadence of Simeon Solomon and Aubrey Beardsley, and the high romanticism of Waterhouse'.¹⁸ Sir Frederic Leighton painted idealized pictures of a Greek world that was a vision of beauty, order and human perfection. His biographer Mrs Barrington said: 'Probably no Englishman ever approached the Greek of the Periclean period so nearly as did Leighton.'¹⁹

The Olympians mostly steered clear of the Roman Empire, preferring the abstract purity and marmoreal perfection of Ancient Greece. But Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 'best known and best paid of all Victorian classical painters', was celebrated for the fidelity of his genre paintings of everyday life in the Ancient World, particularly Rome. His desire, as he put it in an 1899 interview, echoing Bulwer-Lytton was 'to express in my pictures that the old Romans were flesh and blood like ourselves, moved by the same passions and emotions'.²⁰ The secret of his success was to portray the rituals, practices and mores of wealthy Romans – their dinner parties, their courtship rites, their shopping expeditions,

their visits to the baths – so that they appeared to spectators, as one commentator put it like ‘Victorians in togas’. At the same time he drew on archaeology to create as accurate a picture as possible for buildings, furniture and clothing, so that spectators felt they were learning while viewing. Alma-Tadema said: ‘If I am to revive ancient life, if I am to make it relive on canvas, I can do so only by transporting my mind into the far off ages, which deeply interest me, but I must do it with the aid of archaeology. I must not only create a *mise-en-scène* that is possible but probable.’²¹ It was his archaeological accuracy and sense of dramatic composition that was to lead to Alma-Tadema becoming the established painter most often employed by the leading actor-managers of the Victorian stage.

Besides Greece and Rome, popular interest in the empires of the Near East (Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia) was also stimulated by archaeological discovery. It was Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 that initiated a new interest in that country and its ancient past. The expedition was accompanied by 151 scientists and artists, charged with documenting all aspects of the country, including its ancient monuments. One of the discoveries during the expedition was the Rosetta Stone which contained an inscription written in both Egyptian and Greek. This enabled Jean-François Champollion to decipher the hitherto incomprehensible Egyptian hieroglyphs, a discovery made public in 1822. This began the process of allowing scholars to read the records of Egyptian history.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw a scramble for antiquities to supply the demands of European museums and private collectors. The Moslem rulers of Egypt, incurious about the country’s pre-Islamic past and uninterested in pagan relics and monuments, were perfectly happy to grant concessions to Europeans to investigate, excavate and collect. During this period, Giovanni Batista Belzoni (1778–1823) conducted pioneering excavations at Gizeh, Thebes and Abu Simbel. Systematic archaeological investigations only began after 1850, dominated initially by the French archaeologist Auguste Mariette, who created the first museum of Egyptian antiquities in 1863. Major discoveries were subsequently made by Sir Gaston Maspero and Sir Flinders Petrie, under whom the science of Egyptology developed. In 1866 the British Museum established a separate department of Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities. The Egyptian Exploration Fund was established in 1882 to finance archaeological digs. Academic posts for the study of Egyptology were established at the universities of London (1892), Oxford (1901), Liverpool (1906) and Manchester (1913).

The discoveries, the archaeological activities and the work of painters in recording the ruins and creating imaginative reconstructions of ancient Egyptian life sparked a craze for all things Egyptian, dubbed 'Egyptomania' and lasting throughout the nineteenth century. It received a new stimulus with the opening of the Suez Canal on 17 November 1869 and the premiere soon after at the Cairo Opera House of Verdi's opera *Aida* from a story provided by Auguste Mariette. It was given another major boost when Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun, which was opened in 1923 to reveal a fabulous array of treasures and artefacts and created a worldwide sensation known as 'Tutmania'. The contents of the tomb inspired fashionable new lines in clothing, jewellery, hats, furniture and cosmetics.²²

What accounts for this obsession with Egypt rather than other ancient Near Eastern empires, such as Assyria and Babylon, which were also excavated? It was partly a byproduct of Romanticism, with its preoccupation with the past and with the occult. The monumental physical remains (pyramids, obelisks, sarcophagi, the Sphinx) appealed to the cult of the picturesque, which included a fondness for ruins. The customs and practices recorded in such works as Sir Gardner Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1836), which has been called 'the most influential book on Ancient Egypt to appear in English during the nineteenth century',²³ catered to a taste for the exotic which represented an escape from the drabness and conformity of modern industrial society (mummification, the animal-headed gods and goddesses, the brother/sister marriage of the monarchs). Ancient Egyptian beliefs and lore informed various esoteric cults such as Theosophy and Freemasonry.

There was also an ideological significance in Egyptomania. The nineteenth century was an age of empires. Egypt had been an empire and had lessons to offer on the rise and fall of imperial powers. Professor Fekri Hassan has plausibly argued that the acquisition and transportation of Egyptian monuments, particularly obelisks, recognized as symbols of cosmic power, was a decisive bid to legitimize the rule of modern empires 'by cannibalizing other civilizations in order to assume a superior position in the order of the world'.²⁴ This practice dated back at least to the Roman Empire which began the process of removing obelisks from Egypt to Rome partly as victory trophies but also partly as symbols of the process by which a new and thriving empire in the West was replacing an old, worn-out, decadent empire in the East.

For Britain, there was an additional stimulus to interest. Egypt featured significantly in two of the most important cultural productions

to the Victorian Age – the Bible and Shakespeare. The Bible included the story of Moses and the exodus of the Jews from their captivity in Egypt to the creation of a new kingdom in the Holy Land. Shakespeare dramatized the story of Antony and Cleopatra with its clash of empires, temperaments and civilizations.

Egyptomania had a vast range of cultural expressions. As early as 1812 the showman William Bullock created the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, nominally inspired by the temple of Hathor at Dendera, complete with statues of Isis and Osiris, sphinxes, hieroglyphs and lotus columns. The hall contained galleries furnished with Egyptian décor and a representation of the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I, complete with imitation murals and an original sarcophagus. Among the many exhibitions staged there one of the most successful was a display of the artefacts collected by Belzoni in 1821. The hall survived until 1904 though latterly it was used for musical and magical shows.²⁵

But the Egyptian Hall was not the only manifestation of the craze. The British Museum opened an Egyptian gallery. The Crystal Palace at Sydenham featured an Egyptian Court which from 1854 until it burned down in 1936 combined spectacle and education. The Egyptian architectural style appeared across the globe, applied to such diverse buildings as zoos, factories, cinemas, amusement parks, department stores, suspension bridges and war memorials, symbolizing monumental solidity and permanence but also suggesting a promise of romance, mystery and adventure.²⁶

Besides buildings and exhibitions, the public became familiar with the visual imagery of Egypt, its people, its history and its customs, from paintings, plays, operas and latterly films. There was substantial overlap between these forms, with paintings in particular influencing the settings and stagings of the dramatic retellings of Egyptian life. Massive, teeming, atmospheric canvases by John Martin (*The Seventh Plague of Egypt, The Destruction of Pharaoh's Host*), J.M.W. Turner (*The Fifth Plague of Egypt*) and David Roberts (*The Israelites Leaving Egypt*) with their hordes of extras, monumental buildings and extreme weather, look like blueprints for theatrical spectacles and later Hollywood epics. Other episodes from Egyptian history that captured the imagination of painters were Joseph's sojourn in the country and his role at Pharaoh's court and the death of Cleopatra, which inspired a host of artists to depict her, usually gloriously naked, sprawled amid cushions and draperies.²⁷

The Victorians were fascinated by the idea that the ancients were 'people like us' in fancy dress and genre painters responded to this by

imagining episodes from everyday life, staged amid carefully researched costumes, artefacts, settings, rituals and pursuits. Alma-Tadema painted twenty-five Egyptian genre scenes without ever having been there. Notable among them were *Pastimes in Ancient Egypt*, *An Egyptian Widow* and *Egyptian Games*. In the same vein were Edwin Long's *The Gods and their Makers*, Edward John Poynter's *Adoration to Ra* and Frederick Bridgman's *Procession of the Sacred Bull Apis*.

Elsewhere in the Near East, the primary stimulus to archaeological activity was the desire to prove the truth of the Bible stories and to discredit the attacks on the biblical account of the Creation by geologist Charles Lyell and evolutionist Charles Darwin. The first permanent archaeological body to be set up was the Palestine Exploration Society in 1865, 'for the purpose of investigating the archaeology, geography, geology and natural history of the Holy Land'.²⁸ These excavations identified towns and cities, battles and foreign conquerors mentioned in the Bible.

There were spectacular discoveries relating to those powerful empires which regularly reached out to swallow up Israel. In the 1840s Paul Emile Botta excavated Khorsabad uncovering exquisite bas reliefs which detailed everyday life in Ancient Assyria. Austen Henry Layard excavated Nimrud (the biblical Calah) and Nineveh. His 1849 book *Nineveh and its Remains* became a best-seller, running through four editions immediately. Henry Creswick Rawlinson deciphered cuneiform writing, making the texts discovered by the archaeologist accessible. Layard had discovered the King's Library at Nineveh with thousands of cuneiform tablets recording the history, mythology, magic, diplomacy, medicine and science of Assyria. In 1853 at Nineveh the palace of King Assurbanipal (known to the Greeks as Sardanapalus) was discovered by Hormuzd Rassam, previously Layard's assistant. In the 1870s interest turned from the Assyrians to the Sumerians and Babylonians. In 1872 George Smith identified and deciphered a fragmentary Chaldean account of the Deluge, which appeared to confirm the story of Noah's flood. In 1880 Rassam made the first major find in Babylonia, the site of the biblical Sepharvaim, which contained 50,000 inscribed cylinders and tablets. Sumerian Telloh was excavated by the French who found the Stela of the Vultures with its army of Sumerian warriors advancing in phalanx. In 1887 an American expedition excavated Nippur, finding 30,000 Sumerian tablets. It was a German expedition under Robert Koldewey that excavated Babylon in the period 1899–1913. The Ishtar Gate, with its glazed brickwork, dragons and bulls in relief, was reconstructed in Berlin. In the 1920s Sir Leonard Woolley excavated Ur of the Chaldees. As a result of these excavations, much was discovered about

the history, religion, life and work of the peoples of Sumeria, Assyria and Babylonia.²⁹

Despite the dominance of religion in nineteenth-century life, the Bible was not for the most part on the agenda of contemporary painters. There were comparatively few new biblical paintings. The Royal Academy catalogues indicate that only an average of 2.5 per cent of the paintings on show annually between 1825 and 1870 had religious subjects.³⁰ Although the Bible was a favoured theme of the Old Masters, their art was deemed to be inherently Catholic in outlook. There was in Britain no established Protestant pictorial tradition. The Protestant Church did not commission art, and painters necessarily catered to the tastes of their patrons and the wider public. Articles in the periodical press regularly called for religious painting to be used as a vehicle to elevate the taste and moral values of the public. Critics such as Mrs Anna Jameson in *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848) and John Ruskin in *Modern Painters* volume 2 (1846) advocated the study of the techniques and approach of early art and combining this with up-to-date realism and the creative use of symbolism and typology to create a truly Protestant art.

It was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who put this recommendation into effect. A recognizable informality and domesticity characterized works such as Ford Madox Brown's *Our Lady of Good Children* (1848), which showed Mary washing the fingers of the Baby Jesus, Brown's *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* (1852–56) and Millais's *Christ in the House of his Parents* (1849–50). But it was Holman Hunt who became known as 'The Painter of Christ'. As Michaela Giebelhausen puts it: 'Rigorously Protestant in outlook, his work combined an understanding of contemporary Biblical scholarship with naturalist and Orientalist modes of representation. It presented a successful interpretation of scripture that spoke to the age.'³¹

The mid-nineteenth century was the time when biblical scholarship focused on the historicity of Jesus, a trend which produced such influential works as David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835, revised 1864), Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jesus* (1863) and John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1865). The historicity of Jesus the man was combined with the demand for authenticity in settings and trappings which sent Holman Hunt travelling in the Holy Land and researching the props in his paintings. This combination of historicization, Orientalization and spiritual uplift through the application of symbolism and typology made Holman Hunt's Jesus pictures, *The Light of the World* (1851–53), *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1854–60) and *The Shadow of Death* (1870–73)

among the most influential and recognizable of all nineteenth-century paintings.

There was another and equally influential source of biblical illustration, the pictorial Bible, which became a fixture in many Victorian homes, shaping the popular perception of the Bible stories. Charles Knight, the great advocate of popular education and the diffusion of useful knowledge, transformed the established format of the illustrated Bible with his *Pictorial Bible* (1836–38) in which, alongside engravings of Old Master paintings, he included new engravings showing the flora and fauna, architecture, customs, dress and landscape of the Bible. During the 1840s the work of contemporary artists also began to be included in illustrated Bibles. For the third edition of his *Pictorial Bible* (1847–48) Knight eliminated the Old Masters' pictures because of their inaccuracies of manners and costume and replaced them by modern, archaeologically accurate pictures. *The Illustrated Family Bible* (1859–63), published by John Cassell, adopted the same approach.³²

But it was the work of two contemporary French painters, Gustave Doré (1832–83) and James Tissot (1836–1902), which had the most long-lasting influence on the popular imagination of the Victorian public and on the visuals of stage and screen. The 228 illustrations that Doré provided for an edition of the Bible published in 1866 in London and Paris became his most popular work. Doré's biographer Joanna Richardson thought the Bible peculiarly suited to his powers:

It offered him an almost endless series of intensely dramatic events. His visions of the looming tower of Babel, the plague of darkness in Egypt, the death of Samson, Isaiah's vision of the destruction of Babylon; these vast, forbidding scenes, heavy with doom, remind one of the visions of John Martin. They also reveal many elements by now familiar in Doré's work: the mountain scenes, the lurid skies, the complicated battles, the almost unremitting brutality. Doré's illustrations of the Old Testament remind us, above all, of the God of Wrath: of massacres and murders, decapitations and avenging angels. There is too, a period element: the angels are Victorian angels, full of sentiment; the women are, again, keepsake women, the children are Victorian children: sentimental or wise beyond their years.³³

In England, Doré was sometimes called 'the preacher-painter'. Sermons were preached on his work and Cassells reproduced his Bible illustrations in their *Daily Devotion for the Household*. As Richardson puts it:

‘The Victorians delighted in Doré’s sentimentality, and in his drama. They were touched, too, by his religious leanings.’³⁴

Tissot, painter of fashionable society ladies and their luxurious lifestyle, underwent a religious conversion in 1885 when he claimed to have had a vision of Christ during Mass at the church of St Sulpice in Paris which he had attended to gather atmosphere for his proposed picture ‘The Choir Singer’. He was inspired to embark on an illustrated version of the New Testament. The so-called Tissot Bible coincided exactly with a Catholic revival in France, under way from the 1880s onwards, which was mystical, visionary and anti-rationalist. In preparation for his work, he visited the Holy Land in 1886–87 and 1889, sketching and photographing dress, faces, architecture and topography. He studied archaeological and theological literature. The result was *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ: 365 compositions from the four gospels with notes and explanatory drawings*, in which everything was documented and theological doctrine explained. The pictures were shown first in Paris in 1894 and London in 1896 and then on tour in the United States in 1898. Everywhere they were a remarkable success. The pictures were published with the Bible text in a luxury edition in 1896–97, earning Tissot a million francs. The 1897 English edition was dedicated to Mr Gladstone. Tissot’s biographer Michael Wentworth explains the popularity of the Tissot Bible thus: ‘In its blend of discursive erudition, documentary reportage and carefully delineated “inspiration”, the Tissot Bible is a mirror image of the literal-minded faith prevalent at the end of the century.’³⁵ The Bible proved equally acceptable to Catholics and Protestants and became familiar throughout the Anglo-Saxon world. The success of his New Testament inspired Tissot to turn next to the Old Testament. There was a further trip to the Holy Land in 1896, but Tissot died in 1902 with the project uncompleted. Only 200 of the projected 396 pictures had been completed. Other artists finished the project from Tissot’s sketches and they were published in a two-volume edition in 1904. Like Doré’s illustrations Tissot’s were to provide the most familiar visual illustrations of the Old and New Testaments for several decades.

Just as in paintings, so too in the Victorian theatre history was a staple subject. As theatre historian Richard Schoch has written: ‘Performance was a powerful agent of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century... greater than that of literature, painting or even photography.’³⁶ The visual imagery of these historical plays was often directly inspired by famous paintings and plays were staged, framed and lit like paintings. Performance and visual imagery combined to create a popular memory of history, but one which often looked to romance, myth and melodrama for inspiration rather than to academic research.

But the theatre operated under certain inescapable constraints. One was censorship. From 1737 to 1968 the stage functioned under the oversight of the Lord Chamberlain's office and had to conform to a strict set of regulations designed to preserve moral standards and the political, religious and social status quo. All plays had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office and could not be performed without his official imprimatur. This effectively meant the exclusion from the stage of explicit discussions of politics, religion and sex.³⁷

One particular prohibition in force throughout the century was the ban on the dramatization of Bible stories on the stage which explains why, in marked contrast to twentieth-century Hollywood, biblical stories were absent from the Victorian stage. As the examiner of plays William Bodham Donne said in 1866: 'both as a matter of morality, and as a matter of taste, I never allow any associations with scripture or theology to be introduced into a play'.³⁸ Works which fell foul of this ban included Racine's *Athalie*, Rossini's opera *Moses in Egypt* and Wilde's *Salome*. The first major West End production to receive a licence was Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *Joseph and his Brethren* in 1913. The Lord Chamberlain's ban was underpinned by the long-running hostility of the church to the stage which began to moderate significantly only in the 1890s. This may explain the relaxation of the censorial ban in 1913, something that was generally welcomed in the press.

A second constraint on theatrical producers was the commercial imperative of the box office. Plays would run only as long as the audiences came. Success in any particular genre inspired imitations. The public by their repeated attendance created a repertoire of much-loved favourite plays which leading actors departed from at their peril. Until 1843, three theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Haymarket, had a monopoly of spoken drama in London, with the so-called 'minor theatres' able only to perform *burlettas*, or musical entertainments. But the monopoly was ended by the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act.

Popular throughout the Victorian period was the taste for theatrical spectacle. Spectacle was an integral part of everyday life, from the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace through to the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria. It was a feature of Victorian painting, of public buildings and shows of all kinds.³⁹ Audiences had a passion both for the visual and for archaeological and historical accuracy and theatres supplied it, happily justifying the expense on the grounds of its educational value, a recurrent refrain from within the theatre world which waged a continuing campaign to raise the social status of the stage. So spectacle and authenticity went hand in hand in the recreation of the Ancient World.

Interestingly each area of the Ancient World could serve as an arena to discuss contemporary problems that Victorian audiences understood and with which they could engage. Plays set in the Roman Empire (*Claudian*, *The Sign of the Cross*, *Hypatia*, *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis*) charted the conflict between Christianity and paganism and explored the excesses of Roman tyrants, the absence of democracy and how to remedy it (*Junius*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Nero*). Power politics and religious superstition featured in plays related to Ancient Egypt (*Pharaoh*, *Nitocris*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *False Gods*). The archaeological discoveries in the Near East provided the inspiration for spectacular and educational recreations of ancient civilizations (*Sardanapalus*, *The Daughters of Babylon*, *Herod*).

Plays set in Ancient Greece tended to explore the proper gender roles for men and women (*Pygmalion and Galatea*, *The Cup*, *Clito*, *Ulysses*). But gender roles and the approved definitions of masculinity and femininity figured in most Ancient World dramas. Victorian society was strictly gendered, with men and women expected to fill complementary roles. John Ruskin, citing as his authorities Shakespeare, Scott and Dante, outlined the ideal roles and relationships of men and women in *Of Queens' Gardens*. He insisted that the rights and responsibilities were inexorably linked and not to be considered separately.

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision... By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial... But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence.⁴⁰

This conventional wisdom of the Victorian age was summed up poetically by Tennyson in *The Princess*:

Man for the field, and woman for the hearth;
 Man for the sword and for the needle she;
 Man with the head and woman with the heart;
 Man to command and woman to obey;
 All else confusion.⁴¹

The dominant views of the age in terms of gender roles were given vivid and powerful expression in popular culture, which in books, plays, pictures and magazines reinforced what was being taught at home, school and church. The popular success of actors and actresses, theatres and plays was directly related to the extent to which they conformed to and expressed the majority views of the age. The enduring popularity of such stars as Helen Faucit, Mary Anderson and Wilson Barrett derived in part from their successful embodiments of the recognized and approved ideals of femininity and masculinity.

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