Introduction
Ancient Rome
and English Renaissance Drama

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Largely conceived of as a supreme ideal of military, political, artistic and cultural excellence towards which the present invariably tended in an unflagging striving for emulation, ancient Rome penetrated the early modern English imagination with incredible pervasiveness (Hunter 1977)[1]. The adjective "Roman" primarily stood for a complex of values variously subsumed under the broader notion of *virtus*: *dignitas*, *integritas*, *constantia*, *pudicitia*, *fides*, *pietas*, *gravitas*, *sobrietas* (Ronan 1995: 151-4). Rome, however, had arguably also represented evils like *superbia*, brutality, sadism, ingratitude, destruction, tyranny, horror, blasphemy, fratricide and human sacrifice. This ambiguity was a crucial aspect of *romanitas* that early moderns could still penetrate with an immediacy not yet encroached upon by the rigid conceptual framework later imposed by Neoclassicism (pp. 4-5). In addition, Rome to the early modern mind could never mean simply the capital city of the Roman empire: it also meant the home of the Vatican, and thus connoted Roman Catholicism, the despised Other which Protestants officially feared and hated but for which many of the older generation perhaps also felt nostalgia. As a result, Rome had a double power: it evoked, with extraordinary emotional power, two separate pasts, both acknowledged as foundational to English national identities, but both now lost.

As one of the few uninterrupted extensive historical narratives available to the Renaissance – entirely accessible in the vernacular as early as 1601 through translations of major Roman authorities such

[1] For general discussions on the reception of the Roman past in early modern English drama, also see Gentili 1991: 7-20; Ronan 1995; Cox Jensen 2012: 1-21.

as Caesar, Appian, Plutarch, Livy and Tacitus, as well as English compositions providing narrative links between the latter two authors' works (Kewes 2011: 518-9) – the history of ancient Rome constituted an inescapable touchstone within the socio-political debate and was regularly used to comment implicitly on topical and often incendiary issues such as the nature and limits of the sovereign's power, the legitimacy and ethics of tyrannicide, the roles of counsellors and favourites in influencing state policy, the confessional feuds between Protestant and Catholic, the dangers of internecine strife and political fragmentation, the dire social consequences of the disruption of *concordia* and the enfeeblement of *virtus*, the lawfulness and pitfalls of colonial expansion, and the succession to the throne. For versatility, nothing could equal Rome.

The medieval British legend (first appearing in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* but especially known through Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*) according to which a certain Brute of Troy, a legendary great grandson of Aeneas, had been the eponymous founder and first king of Britain lingered on in many quarters despite having been exposed as fiction rather than history by Polydore Vergil as early as the 1530s (Curran 2002: 17) and contributed to rendering the link between Renaissance England and ancient Rome even more indissoluble and fascinating.

A singular dramatic potential was inherent in the events of Roman history, which would be familiar to quite a large number of individuals thanks to the Latin-centred curriculum of both grammar schools and universities (Cox Jensen 2012: 25-44). Such dramatic potential proved to be decisive in stimulating the transformation of the Roman past into a storehouse of spectacular dramatic plots, with *exempla* and lessons of wisdom from the past being routinely applied to the present – either for moral didacticism and topical application or as guidance to sovereigns and politicians – chiefly from the mid-1590s onwards, a decade that also witnessed an impressive proliferation of English translations and original accounts of Roman history (Spencer 1957: 29; Kewes 2011: 518-21).

Despite the early modern era being "characterized by a deepening and more fully articulated conception of time and history" and a more conscious appropriation of the past than previous ages (Kewes 2006: 2), a view of history as largely cyclical was still widespread, encouraging an unflinching and systematic quest for analogies with

the past whose ultimate objective was to derive beneficial lessons for the present. The basic assumption was that human nature was immutable; therefore, the situations and problems of the past were ineluctably bound to repeat themselves (Worden 2006: 75). As a consequence, the past was seen as an invaluable storehouse of wisdom and knowledge, whose lessons were indefinitely applicable to later ages.

Historical plays served a function not dissimilar to that served today by Hollywood blockbusters such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), possibly contributing to shaping the social imagination more significantly and with longer-lasting effects than any other cultural or educational means. At least two-thirds of the English plays other than comedies written between 1560 and 1700 dealt with historical matters: many of these were staged in front of wide audiences, making their way into the social memory of the then-dawning English nation – or, at least, that of Londoners (Worden 2006: 80). Poets were regarded as both historians and political thinkers, insofar as political thought was largely also historical thought (p. 70); poetry was even hailed as superior to history for its higher potential to impart moral precepts, inasmuch as poets were granted ampler freedom to modify and rearrange historical events in order to construct narratives capable of persuasively conveying moral teachings. Historical and dramatic writing were often seen as alternative and complementary means of retrieving the lessons of the past, within a cultural framework fostering a far less restricted conception of what is now called historiography (Worden 1994: 68; Kewes 2006: 5)[2].

The interest in the Roman past displayed by early modern English playwrights was fervid, incessant, prodigious: if one takes into account the Roman-themed dramatic works written in England between 1567 and 1642 that are still extant together with those that are lost and of which only the titles are known, one is faced with a figure around one hundred (Ronan 1995: 165-85), and "there is good reason to believe that during most years in the Renaissance, the output of Roman plays was at least 10 percent of the total" (p. 174). Drama proved to be the medium of choice to explore the

[2] For a broader picture of the evolution of historical thought in early modern England, see Woolf 1990: 9-44; Kamps 1996: 11-16, 26-50; Woolf 2006.

contradictory duplicity of Rome. Always a synthesis of different polities, cultures and races, Rome became for early modern English drama the privileged place – at the same time geographic and symbolic, so near and yet so far in both space and time – for the development of a complex series of questions inscribed in a broader range of socio-political interests that closely impinged on the British context (Del Sapio Garbero 2010: 17; 2009: 4).

In addition, although the potential to affect the social imagination inherent in any cultural representation of the past predictably and regularly made history plays wind up on the authorities' radar, histories by continental authors were far more frequently scrutinised than those dealing with the classical or British past (Clegg 2003: 52-3). This rendered the depiction of events drawn from Roman history particularly expedient for playwrights, as it also enabled them to deny with a certain degree of plausibility the deliberateness of specific parallels with the present if need be: when Philip Massinger submitted a controversial play about the vexed relationship between the Protestant Netherlands and their Catholic Habsburg masters, the censor refused to license it, but when Massinger resubmitted it with its setting changed to ancient Rome and the Portuguese character Sebastian rechristened Antiochus, *Believe As You List* (1631) was cleared for staging.

Integrated into such a sensitive and potentially explosive network of negotiations and appropriations between past and present, Roman history and its personalities were variously distorted and manipulated under the influence of powerful socio-cultural trends and forces, and inevitably ended up taking on fluid contours and protean features. The result was invariably a complex and enthralling blend of historical actuality and dramatic fiction – a dazzling, captivating and sometimes even disturbing mixture, within which history was shaped anew each time like an amendable palimpsest by the *visio mundi* of whoever staged it, and the past was reactivated by a present that it simultaneously contributed to moulding.

The reception of the Roman past in early modern English literature and culture has attracted renewed and vigorous scholarly interest over the past fifteen years. The vitality of this field of enquiry concretely materialised in Italy in the series of coordinated events devoted to William Shakespeare and the resonance of ancient Rome

throughout his oeuvre held in Rome from 7 to 20 April 2016 under the collective title *Shakespeare 2016: Memoria di Roma* to celebrate the 400th anniversary of his death[3]. Despite Shakespeare's Roman plays still being – predictably – the most obvious and common objects of study[4], attempts have been made towards wider-ranging and more sustained explorations of clusters of non-Shakespearean Roman-themed plays concerning both the commercial theatre and neo-Senecan drama[5]. Further proof of the liveliness of the field is the fact that, at this very moment, Lisa Hopkins and Graham Holderness are working, respectively, on the monographs *From the Romans to the Normans on the English Renaissance Stage* and *Shakespeare and Rome*, while Paulina Kewes is editing the collection of essays *Ancient Rome and Early Modern England: History, Literature, and Political Imagination*.

This issue of *Textus* therefore displays relevance and timeliness by contributing to such a burgeoning area of research through a wide range of articles giving ample demonstration of "the sheer variety and richness of Roman themes in the works of this period that in turn elicited correspondingly diverse applications from audiences and readers" (Kewes 2011: 516). Through the exploration of a broad array of works produced by such different playwrights as William Gager, William Shakespeare, William Alexander, Thomas Heywood, Philip Massinger, Jasper Fisher and Richard Brome under three

[3] The project was awarded the Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Republic.

[4] Twentieth-century studies focusing on Shakespeare's Roman plays from different viewpoints include MacCallum 1910; Barroll 1958; Charney 1961; Traversi 1963; Simmons 1974; Cantor 1976; Platt 1976; Miola 1983; Martindale and Martindale 1994; Kahn 1997. They have been followed in recent years by Del Sapio Garbero (ed.) 2009; Del Sapio Garbero, Isenberg, Pennacchia (eds) 2010; Pennacchia 2012; Burrow 2013; Innes 2015.

[5] Aside from studies focusing on single plays, which cannot be listed here comprehensively, it will suffice to mention wide-ranging studies like Miller 2001; Hadfield 2005; Hopkins 2008; Chernaik 2011; Cox Jensen 2012; Paleit 2013; Cadman 2015; Lovascio 2015. To these should be added, among others, *Rome and Home: The Cultural Uses of Rome in Early Modern English Literature* (special issue 25 of *Early Modern Literary Studies* recently edited by Daniel Cadman, Lisa Hopkins and Andrew Duxfield), the O.U.P. Classical Presences series, the companions to classical reception recently published by Brill and Wiley-Blackwell, and the second volume of *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. Patrick Cheney and Philip Hardie.

such dissimilar monarchs as Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I, *The Uses of Rome in English Renaissance Drama* seeks to contribute to a more precise assessment of the practices through which received historical accounts and ideas about the past were appropriated, manipulated and/or recreated in Renaissance England. In doing so, it also hopes to stimulate a greater understanding of English national origins and discourses thereof, all the more so at such a delicate time, when heated debate is raging on the issue of whether England is part of Europe and to what extent it shares a common European cultural heritage.

Moreover, this issue of *Textus* seeks to foster fresh scholarly interest in the representation and significance of women in Renaissance plays with a Roman setting, an issue that has attracted nowhere near the same amount of scholarly attention as the representation of men. Admittedly, several studies on the portrayal and significance of female characters in early modern literature have been produced in the last decades[6]; however, not enough has been done about what might be gathered about the representation of female characters in the specific context of Roman drama, especially given that the narrative of the founding of the Republic was centrally bound up with the story of a woman, Lucrece. Do female characters in Roman plays feature the same traits that can be found in other genres or do they present any peculiar traits? Does the Roman ideal of *virtus* in any way clash with the popular stereotype of woman as invariably disorderly and possessed with an insatiable sexual appetite? Are Roman female characters somehow "special" in early modern English drama? Do the portrayals of women in Roman drama mirror to any extent the actual condition of English women by projecting English values onto their implicit judgments or do they in fact constitute a privileged venue in which to project desires and aspirations about women through the creation of idealised female characters? These are among the most urgent questions that a number of articles in this issue try to begin answering.

Julia Griffin opens this collection with an essay considering some representations of Portia and her relationship with Brutus, focusing on Alexander's and Shakespeare's tragedies of Julius Caesar – with

[6] See, among others, Jardine 1983; Henderson and McManus 1985; Adelman 1992; Hopkins 2002; Kemp 2010; Johnson 2014.

some early reworkings of Shakespeare's play, where the authors reach different conclusions on what to do when a woman describes a wound in her thigh.

William Gager's neo-Latin tragedy *Dido* is investigated by Cristiano Ragni. The essay especially focuses on the play's multiple references to its contemporary historical context (and to Elizabeth I in particular), while also showing to what extent the play shares the demystifying spirit informing Ovid's alternative version of the Dido-Aeneas story.

The impressive number of references to the Graeco-Roman gods in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the focus of Camilla Caporicci's article. On the one hand, the invocations to the gods contribute to differentiating the Roman and the Egyptian worlds, though also revealing a common attitude towards the deities. On the other hand, the classical and mythological images of the gods are integrated into that confounding game of contrasting judgments and multiple viewpoints that are at the tragedy's hermeneutical heart, thereby enhancing the ambivalence of Antony's and Cleopatra's paradoxical portrayals.

Alisa Manninen investigates spectacle in Shakespeare's Roman plays as a means for political participation that is accessible to women. In *Julius Caesar* Portia fails to transform her claim to Roman virtue into a meaningful role in the republic, *Coriolanus* gives its concluding triumph to Volumnia, the play's most successful performer of *romanitas*, while in *Antony and Cleopatra* the sense of diminishment that is created by Cleopatra's suicide is echoed in Octavia's irrelevance to the performances of the Roman Empire: stripped of the roles available to women, spectacle will serve Octavius alone.

The anonymous *Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* is explored by Lisa Hopkins and Sharon McDonnell, who argue that through its focus on the relationship between Tiberius and Sejanus the play connects its near obsession with poison and poisoners to the figure of the minion as an implicit way of criticising James VI and I's *penchant* for favourites and to turn his favoured persona of Augustus Caesar against him by aligning him with a very different kind of emperor.

Tommaso Continisio's essay analyses the sharp contrast between the female protagonists of Thomas Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*. Tullia's ambition to usurp her father's power for her husband's

sake may be construed as a reaction to her status as a woman in a male-dominated world, a behaviour that the play ultimately treats as aberrant. Lucrece represents at first the perfect woman/wife of Protestant thought but then casts off her passive role and displays "masculine" forcefulness and courage, while the male characters' claims to honour utterly dissolve. Such a striking contrast seems to reflect the deeply contradictory portrayal of Rome and the Romans in English Renaissance drama.

Two examples of the jealous husband in Philip Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* and *The Roman Actor* are examined by Kibrina Davey as a way of understanding the relationship between cuckoldry and violence. The essay focuses on the possible early modern proto-psychological explanations behind Sforza's and Domitian's decision to perform their emotions violently, as well as considering the settings and locations of the plays as possible contributing factors to the portrayal of emotional responses.

Domenico Lovascio reads Jasper Fisher's *Fuimus Troes* as an academic play raising a number of issues relevant to Stuart foreign and domestic policy. The article especially discusses the play's scepticism about the notion of *translatio imperii* that was so crucial to Stuart propaganda, while also considering how the play turns out to be chillingly prophetic in its secondary focus on the questions of tyranny and internal dissension which would mark Charles I's reign till its tragic epilogue.

An exploration of the uses of Rome in the theatre of Richard Brome is at the core of Cristina Paravano's piece, which argues that the allusions to Roman culture, traditions and history throughout Brome's oeuvre, far from being celebratory and deferential, seem strategically and deliberately to enhance a dark image of the Roman legacy and, consequently, of England during the period of Charles I's personal rule.

Maddalena Pennacchia closes this issue with a review of Luca Aversano's *Della rovina, di tempo e di bellezza. Shakespeare e il destino di Roma*, a production performed in Rome in April 2016 as a contribution to *Shakespeare 2016: Memoria di Roma*. With the professional advice of Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Aversano designed the show as a mosaic of fragments from Shakespeare's five Roman plays and historical narrative poem, which he set within a musical framework consisting of selections from Antonio

Vivaldi, Georg Friedrich Händel and Henry Purcell. The show proved to be a unique opportunity to rediscover the mythical past of Rome – in Rome – through Shakespeare's skilful reuse of that past, with Shakespeare himself sounding, as a result, more classical than ever.

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