

‘Antique Fiction’ and the forgotten legacies of ancient Rome in Wilkie Collins’s *Antonina*

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This article examines the treatment and uses of ancient Rome in Wilkie Collins’s first published novel, Antonina (1850). It suggests that the novel, which has been almost entirely overlooked by modern scholarship, represents a significant departure from earlier, more negative receptions of Rome in the cultural and political discourses of the early nineteenth century, as well as in the ‘antique fictions’ of the period. Rather, Antonina represents a shift towards a more enthusiastic adoption of the Roman past as a framework for glorifying the racial and cultural credentials of the British imperialist. Set during the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in 410, the novel’s romantic pairing of the Roman maiden Antonina and the Gothic warrior Hermanric serves to mythologize the origins of a British readership who would be heirs to Roman culture and empire as well as Gothic martial virtue.

In the early months of 1846, a twenty-two-year-old Wilkie Collins began work on what would become his first published novel — a surprisingly violent romance set during the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in 410. The novel was widely praised by contemporary critics, with one reviewer from *The Gentleman’s Magazine* proclaiming it ‘sufficient in itself to entitle its author to a place in the foremost rank’ of historical novelists. The *Athenaeum* too conceded that *Antonina* ‘claim[ed] rank not far behind the antique fictions of Lockhart, Croly, Bulwer and Ward’.¹ Despite widespread early praise, however, *Antonina* has been almost entirely overlooked by modern critics or else, where it is addressed, it is usually dismissed as juvenilia or, stylistically, as a failed novel.² Such repudiations are, in some senses, understandable. Certainly in its tone the text struggles to break from the archaisms of speech and description that had become typical of ‘antique fictions’ of the early nineteenth century.³ Such works included Cornelia Knight’s *Marcus Flaminius; or, A View of*

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1 Anon (April 1850: 408) ; Anon (March 1850). For more on the resoundingly positive reception of *Antonina* see Ackroyd (2013: 39–41).

2 Nayder (2006: 142–150) and Heller (1992: 38–57) remain the only critics to discuss *Antonina* at any length, Nayder as part of a broader examination of empire in Collins’s writing, and Heller with a focus on class tensions and gender.

3 Trodd (2006: 25) notes the Collins had not ‘yet discovered a voice of his own to replace the florid Bulwerian rhetoric that he often mimicked’.

the Military, Political and Social Life of the Romans (1792), J.G. Lockhart's *Valerius* (1821), and reached their zenith in Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which Collins read during his childhood years in Italy between 1836 and 1838. In its subject matter too *Antonina* (1850) has proved anomalous and unwieldy. Begun three weeks before the author entered Lincoln's Inn to train in the legal profession which would provide so distinctive a framework for the rest of his novels, *Antonina* was Collins's first and only foray into the ancient world and, as such, has been dismissed by critics such as Tamar Heller as 'a generic dead end'.⁴

Yet if *Antonina*, with its anomalous subject matter and underdeveloped style, has proved problematic for Collins scholars and for literary studies more broadly, the novel's importance as a work of Victorian classical reception is far more difficult to dismiss. This article argues that *Antonina* constitutes a critical moment of transition in nineteenth-century receptions of ancient Rome, with Collins finding new meanings and uses for the Roman parallel. Early nineteenth-century novelists had followed Gibbon in using Rome to signify political violence and revolution, decadence and degeneration both of the individual and the state, and, inevitably, the decline and fall of civilization into stately ruin. Rome represented much that was distant, different, or condemnable in the eyes of a British readership. Collins, by contrast, uses Rome to speak to very contemporary mid-Victorian ideologies about national, racial and gender identities which emerge in the wake of rapid imperial expansion in the 1840s. In the romantic pairing of the Roman maiden Antonina with the Gothic warrior Hermanric, Collins advocates an idealized combination of Latin imperial civilization and the hearty masculine vigour of the Teuton which the novel holds up as the hallmarks of the British imperial race. Rome is reclaimed as an ancestor — albeit a racially hybrid ancestor — rather than an other to the modern British empire, its citizens and its soldiers.

The antique novel and the rejection of Rome

As a stately ruin of the kind depicted in the artworks of J.M.W. Turner, William Collins and many others in the 1830s, the more problematic elements of the ancient Roman legacy were rendered safe, even pleasingly beautiful, by virtue of their departedness. Historical novelists, however, were confronted with the double-edged sword of having to depict the lived — or at least the imagined — realities of an ancient civilization whose values were perceived to be both too different and too unsettlingly familiar to British politics and values in the first half of the nineteenth century. In its most political aspect, the Roman parallel had become associated with popular uprising and political violence in the wake of the French Revolution. For Robespierre and his contemporaries it was the Roman republic which best captured the spirit of the revolution, and its founder, Lucius Junius Brutus, who embodied the virtues and duties of the ideal citizen.⁵ Yet these

4 Heller (1992: 38).

5 See Wiles (2011: 150); Arendt (1963: 97–98); Sachs (2010: 14–16); Parker (1937) for more on the revolutionary uses of ancient Rome.

ideologies were inherently associated with notions of transformation and transition, of the overthrow of established order, and even the sanctioning of political violence in the name of extending political power to the people. It is hardly surprising that Napoleon Bonaparte, faced with ruling over a state which loathed monarchy, turned from straightforwardly Republican models, and looked towards Augustus and the Principate for narratives with which to consolidate and legitimize his own individual authority.⁶ Such overt and enthusiastic receptions of Rome by the French meant that the Roman parallel had become politically and ideologically dangerous as a means of framing British identities. We know the revolutionary associations of Rome were never far from Collins's mind as he wrote *Antonina*. Collins had witnessed popular unrest during his childhood travels in Italy, and revised *Antonina* in light of the 1848 revolutions. Indeed, he pitched the novel to its eventual publisher, Richard Bentley, on the grounds of its timeliness, writing in a cover note: 'I have thought it probable that such a work might not inappropriately be offered for your inspection, while recent occurrences continue to direct public attention particularly on Roman affairs.'⁷

If Rome was politically incendiary in the early nineteenth century, then as a pagan, slave-owning society with an empire built upon violent land-based conquest, it also appeared an ill-fitting and unhelpful framework for talking about Britain's social and cultural values, except perhaps as a warning tale or counter example. At a most basic level, Rome was problematically pagan. The earliest enemy and persecutor of the Christian faith loomed especially large in the imaginations of key proponents of the Oxford movement (and, by extension their critics) who looked to the customs and tenets of the early church as a way of validating a particular denominational standpoint. Chief among these texts are Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1853), which recounts the life of Hypatia of Alexandria and her death at the hands of what Kingsley presents as a fanatical and superstitious early church; Cardinal Wiseman's *Fabiola* (1854), set during the Christian persecutions under Diocletian; and John Henry Newman's *Callista* (1856), which imagines the conversion and martyrdom of a young Greek girl in the name of a proto-Catholic Christian faith.⁸ Conversion plots, wherein 'good' characters are designated as such by their willingness to convert to the Christian faith are the central common element of these texts, which were all published in the years immediately following Collins's *Antonina*. With their broadly similar agendas regarding the reception and meaning of Rome, these novels have tended to overshadow Collins's work, which stands alone in its lack

6 See Huet (1999: 53–69) for more on Napoleon's systematic adoption of Augustan models in politics, the arts, and the establishment of a cult of the imperial family.

7 Wilkie Collins, 'Letter to Richard Bentley, 30th August 1849'. Cited in Heller (1992: 49).

8 See Goldhill (2011: 157–59; 167–71) and Burnstein (2014) for more on Victorian historical fictions which deal with religious crisis and controversy.

of conversion plot and its rejection of all kinds of religious fanaticism, whether Christian or pagan.

In addition to its pagan origins, Rome is also vilified by novelists on account of its being a slave-owning society. In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, for instance, Bulwer Lytton makes more than two hundred references to slaves and slavery. His descriptions of a slave's duties — from cooking and serving food, to acting as a security guard or bathhouse attendant, and being the object of a master's sexual advances — are typical of the heavy-handedly scholastic, antiquarian style of much historical fiction set in the ancient world. Yet this is interspersed with more outrageous descriptions of Roman attitudes towards slavery, such as the laments of the aedile Pansa over recent laws banning Romans from throwing their slaves to the wild beasts in the arena. 'Not to let us do what we like with our own, that's what I call an infringement on property itself',⁹ Pansa complains. His disappointment is echoed by Sallust, who later complains that his own dream of breeding perfect-tasting lampreys has been ruined by the new laws, which mean he can no longer feed live slaves to the creatures. Sallust and Pansa are by no means villains so far as the plot is concerned. Indeed, Sallust is the childhood friend of the hero, Glaucus. Yet his attitudes and treatment of slaves make him ultimately repulsive to a British readership which had witnessed the abolition of slavery in 1833, only a year before the novel was published. These scenes hint at a relief on Bulwer Lytton's part at the distance which abolition had placed between the British reader and a Roman world which revelled — at least in the nineteenth-century imagination — in slave-owning, the persecution of Christians, blood sports, and unchecked debauchery.

As well as social and ideological differences, Rome also presented a particularly problematic model of imperial governance in the period before the rapid, land-based expansion of the British Empire in the 1840s. As Kostas Vlassopoulos has noted, the rejection of Rome as a useful model for British imperial conquest had begun as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁰ Attempts by France and Spain to forge universal monarchies in Europe had proved unsuccessful and it seemed that a Roman style empire, with one country asserting dominance over the rest, could no longer exist on the same terms or in the same spaces. Any imperial conquest had now to be made outside of Europe and, by the eighteenth century and the waning of British power in the Americas, this meant looking to the east and to commerce, rather than conquest, as a model for empire. The success of the East India Company, particularly after the decisive victory at Plassey in 1757, helped to promote a commercialist identity for the British Empire and one which depended on trade by sea. It was an imperial identity for which ancient Greece, with its maritime Athenian

9 Bulwer Lytton (1950: 27).

10 See Vlassopoulos (2010: 29–53, esp. 30–36) on the problems of the Roman parallel in the First British Empire; Makdisi (1998: 154–72) on the concept of universal monarchy in Romantic culture.

empire, proved a far more palatable parallel than the more aggressively expansionist and militaristic Roman past. A reviewer of Dr Gillies's *History of Ancient Greece* (1786) captured this preference for the Greek world over the Roman one when he wrote:

By the superiority of their arms and their discipline, the Romans subdued the nations of the earth. But the Athenians afford the only example of a people, who, by virtues of the mind alone, acquired an extensive dominion over men.¹¹

The use of ancient Greece as an intellectual and aesthetic ideal, as well as an imperial one, was supported by contemporary racial theory in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Debbie Challis notes, 'the physical beauty of the Greeks, as evidenced by their art, was used to construct theories of racial difference in the western world which placed certain "types of mankind" above others in a hierarchy of racial and cultural superiority'.¹² Greece represented the apex of western civilization at a time when the newly-acquired Parthenon marbles were being used to proclaim Britain as the rightful heir to Greek culture, and racial theorists were claiming ancient Greek ancestry for the Anglo-Saxon race.¹³ Greece becomes emblematic of a national, intellectual, and cultural ideal whereby aesthetic beauty functions as a signifier of moral and cultural refinement.

The privileging of Greece over Rome is mirrored in the historical novels I have been discussing. Bulwer Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*, Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1853), John Henry Newman's *Callista* (1855) are all set in remote corners of the Roman Empire, but the heroes and heroines in each case are emphatically Greek. These protagonists are characterized by supreme physical beauty after the Greek fashion, whilst also being culturally and artistically accomplished. Newman's Callista, a sculptress and craftswoman by trade, is the envy of the people in her North African town 'because of her good looks [. . .] and because she is a Greek'.¹⁴ The lovers Glaucus and Ione in *The Last Days of Pompeii* are similarly idealized. Ione is given the epithet of 'the beautiful' and 'has a beauty that Greece itself never excelled [. . .] she is a second Helen'.¹⁵ Of her lover, Glaucus, Bulwer Lytton writes:

Heaven had given to Glaucus every blessing but one: it had given him beauty, health, fortune, genius, illustrious descent, a heart of fire, a mind of poetry; but it had denied him the heritage of freedom. He was born in Athens, the subject of Rome.¹⁶

¹¹ [Anon.] (February 1786: 81).

¹² Challis (2010: 95).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴ Newman (1876: 66).

¹⁵ Bulwer Lytton (1950: 48).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

Such paragons of beauty and virtue must exist under the decadence and despotism of the Roman empire wherein:

The world was one vast prison to which the sovereign of Rome was the imperial gaoler; and the very virtues which in the free days of Athens would have made him ambitious, in the slavery of earth made him inactive and supine.¹⁷

Again, Rome is rejected on the grounds of her imperial policy, but also for her slavery, written here as both a social institution and as a force of cultural or spiritual oppression. Although Greece too was a slave-owning society, Roman slavery was more immediately provocative of racial and religious outrage among nineteenth-century readers. Rome's slaves included the more recognizably European races of Gauls and Britons, while the blood sports and persecution of Christians proved problematic for imperial identities at a time that Howard Temperley has identified with 'the awakening of the Evangelical conscience',¹⁸ abolitionist movements, and the missionary mandate of the British Empire.

My purpose in dwelling so long on the use of ancient Greece in the antique novel is to emphasize how pivotal are early nineteenth-century receptions of Greece for representations of Rome. After all, depictions of an exclusively Greek world — even the high classical period — for its own sake are almost unheard of in this period. Ancient Greece, as Norman Vance explains, 'was just too ancient and too far away [...] Its greatest glories came before the Roman Empire and the coming of Christianity, in a totally different world'.¹⁹ It is as part of a binary opposition with Rome that Greece has meaning in those texts. When transposed to the Roman world, Greek characters combine the physical and intellectual perfection of the classical ideal with the religious and moral elevation of an idealized Christian tradition. Add to this the mercantile, naval model of imperial splendour embodied by classical Athens and Greece functions as the perfect positive pole in a binary which casts Rome as the enemy and persecutor of early-nineteenth-century British values.

***Antonina*, empire and the reclamation of Rome**

The antique novel had, for more than fifty years, attached a particular set of almost exclusively negative meanings to the Roman past. Such is the cultural context into which *Antonina* appeared in 1850 and it is only with this context in mind that we can appreciate how unusual was Collins's novel and how far it represents a significant turning point in Victorian receptions of Rome. Although Collins draws upon various conventions of the antique novel, scholars have thus far failed to acknowledge the self-aware, often scathing tone with which he rejects what he presents as the jaded uses of Roman antiquity by novelists. Instead, with *Antonina*, Collins finds new uses

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸ Temperley (2007: 8).

¹⁹ Vance (2012: IV:287).

for the Roman past and particularly ones which reflect changing imperial policies and ideologies.

Set in AD410, the novel takes place during the invasion of Rome by the Goths under Alaric. The Roman court has grown decadent, lethargic, and unmasculine on the spoils of empire. Installed in a palace at Ravenna, it is ruled over by the 'pitifully effeminate'²⁰ boy-emperor Honorius, whose days are spent feeding Rome's chickens rather than defending his empire from the Gothic invasions. In Rome itself, the young maiden Antonina is rejected by her over-zealous Christian father after he mistakenly accuses her of conducting an affair with the wealthy and decadent senator Vetranio. Antonina flees outside the city walls where she is captured by Hermanric, the greatest warrior among the Goths. Hermanric possesses all the martial prowess of his race, but little of the Gothic brutality and bloodlust which have consumed his sister, Goisvintha, whose husband and children were slaughtered by the Romans. Rather than kill Antonina, Hermanric installs her in an abandoned farmhouse outside the city walls, where the pair live a kind of Edenic domestic existence, with Hermanric leaving to fight each morning and returning each evening to the comforts of home. The dream is short-lived, however, when Goisvintha betrays the young couple in revenge for what she perceives to be her brother's rejection of Gothic national values and standards of masculine virtue. Goisvintha cuts off her brother's sword hand in a symbolic act of emasculation and the severing of national and cultural bonds, and his literal death follows soon afterward at the hands of a band of Huns. Antonina escapes and returns to Rome, which is still besieged and starving, but also embroiled in internal clashes between fanatical religious sects. She returns to the care of her father, Numerian, who learns the error of his ways and the story leaves them living quietly and tending to Hermanric's grave, though still with the threat of Gothic invasion hanging over the city.

Already from the summary we can see that Collins is both aware of the conventional portrayals of Rome as decadent and degenerate in the antique novel, but he is also breaking from those conventions in some striking ways. There is no Christian conversion plot in *Antonina* and the lovers at the heart of the story are not Greek, but a Roman maiden and a Gothic warrior. Furthermore, Collins openly laments the limited range of literary genres and cultural forms through which ancient Rome was available for public consumption, and the very narrow meanings assigned to it in those spaces. In his third chapter entitled 'Rome', Collins anticipates that:

The title of this chapter will, we fear, excite emotions of apprehension, rather than curiosity in the breasts of experienced readers. They will doubtless imagine that it is portentous of long rhapsodies on those wonders of antiquity, the description of which has long since

20 Collins (1905: 19). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

become absolutely nauseous to them by incessant iteration. They will foresee wailings over the Palace of the Caesars, and meditations among the arches of the Colosseum. (p.36)

Similar references to the ‘well-worn forum’ and the ‘exhausted colosseum’ (p.37) reveal a growing frustration with Romantic incarnations of these Roman sites as stately ruins, as well as with the extensive archaeological descriptions typical of the antique novel. To this end, Collins promises his readers that *Antonina* will not unfold as ‘a long series of weary paragraphs’ (p.36) in which issues of plot become overwhelmed with historical and archaeological description, or in which the use of real historical personages hinders what Collins calls the ‘fit unity of design’ (p.v) and overall aesthetic. Rather, the novel is a literary manifestation of a growing cultural need to expand the discursive capacity of ancient Rome by the mid-nineteenth century, in response to a period of rapid imperial expansion in the decades immediately preceding its publication.

From around 1840, the British Empire expanded at an accelerated rate, with territories in Sind, Natal, the Punjab, and Gambia annexed in quick succession.²¹ Britain now faced the challenge of governing a multitude of races and peoples as part of an increasingly land-based empire. It was no longer enough for the British imperialist to be a merchant driven by commercial imperatives. He was increasingly expected to be the defender and enforcer of the civilizing mission of empire, which had been conceptualized at various periods in British history as a political, economic, abolitionist or Evangelical duty; but which came to be framed by statesman-writers like Thomas Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan as an educational project, and one for which ancient Rome proved a far more fitting model. As Charles Trevelyan put it in his 1838 work *On the Education of the Peoples of India*:

The Romans at once civilized the nations of Europe, and attached them to their rule by Romanizing them; or, in other words, by educating them in Roman literature and the arts, and teaching them to emulate their conquerors instead of opposing them.²²

The success with which ancient Rome acculturated and assimilated new peoples and populations supplied to imperialist discourse valuable narratives with which to emphasize the benefits of imperial rule for both the colonial power and the subject peoples of empire:

The Roman language and literature, thus enriched and improved, was destined to still prouder triumphs. The inhabitants of the greatest part of Europe and of the North of Africa, educated in every respect like the Romans, became in every respect equal to them. The impression which was then made will never be effaced. It sank so deep into the language and habits of the people, that Latin to this day forms the basis of the tongues of France and

²¹ See Hall (2010: 33) on the ‘breakneck speed’ of annexation in this decade.

²² Trevelyan (1838: 196–97). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

southern Europe, and the Roman law the basis of their jurisprudence. The barbarous hordes which triumphed over the arms, yielded to the arts of Rome. (p.39)

Britain’s own past as a subject of the Roman Empire served as a particularly powerful validation of this narrative of political and cultural submission as the route to advanced civilization. After all, as Trevelyan notes:

The Indians will, I hope, soon stand in the same position towards us in which we once stood to the Romans. Tacitus informs us, that it was the policy of Julius Agricola to instruct the sons of the leading men among the Britons in the literature and science of Rome, and to give them a taste for the refinements of Roman civilization. We all know how well this plan answered. From being obstinate enemies, the Britons soon became attached and confiding friends; and they made more strenuous efforts to retain the Romans, than their ancestors had done to resist their invasion. (p. 196–197)

The subtext of Trevelyan’s comparison is that Britain’s cultural credentials for imperial rule are the product of allowing herself to be Romanized at an earlier stage in her history. It is hardly surprising in this context that Latin texts which deal with the Roman Empire, and especially the Roman Empire in Britain, become increasingly popular in this period as part of the perceived mandate of the civilizing mission. Trevelyan refers explicitly to Tacitus’s account of his father-in-law’s governorship of Britain between AD77 and AD85 and this text, along with others like Virgil’s *Aeneid*, were reprinted and reissued with increasing regularity from around 1840.²³

As well as providing a model for Britain’s imperial policy of Anglicization, these texts, which deal with the relationship between the Roman Empire and her subjects, were also used to articulate a style of national and masculine identity based on notions of racial hybridity. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, although it had long been considered inferior to the great works of Homer by Victorian critics, ‘struck more of a cultural chord during the rise of British imperialism’.²⁴ Virgil, writing in the era of Augustus, had undertaken a retrospective re-planting of Rome’s racial and national roots in order to construct a narrative of imperial destiny for the Roman people. The culmination of this endeavour comes in the sixth book when Aeneas, having landed in Italy, visits the underworld and meets not only his own deceased loved ones, but a procession of great Roman statesmen — the greatest of these being Augustus — who have yet to be born. The existence of these great Romans, and of the empire itself, will depend on Aeneas fulfilling his duty to the gods by combining his own Trojan bloodlines with those of the Latin peoples of Italy, and thereby founding the Roman race. Aeneas, then, is the prototypical imperial father of

23 Bradley (2010: 123–57) notes that there were ‘at least fifteen British school and university editions of the text and no fewer than ten translations’ (p. 143) of the *Agricola* published between 1820 and 1940.

24 Harrison (2008: 113). See also Vasaunia (2009: 83–116).

western literature. The increasing popularity of the *Aeneid* in mid-Victorian culture speaks to a growing impulse to mythologize the racial and cultural heritage of the British imperial race.

Tacitus's *Agricola* constituted an even more directly relevant model of racial and cultural hybridity for Victorian readers, chiefly because of the inclusion of the Briton Calgacus as a credible model of heroic masculinity alongside the noble Roman Agricola. In his eloquent and energetic speech to his troops before the battle of Mons Graupius, Calgacus articulates strongly anti-imperial sentiments, and defiance of the Roman imperial project:

Robbers of the world, having by their universal plunder exhausted the land, they rifle the deep. If the enemy be rich, they are rapacious; if he be poor, they lust for dominion; neither the east nor the west has been able to satisfy them. Alone among men they covet with equal eagerness poverty and riches. To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a solitude and call it peace.²⁵

In many ways Calgacus fits the Tacitean model of virtue which sees commanders, especially military commanders, prepared to die in the name of duty.²⁶ Yet for a nineteenth-century readership which, as Richard Hingley notes, often found in Tacitus's account of Rome and Britain a prototype for contemporary relationships between Britain and her empire in India, Calgacus is a necessarily tragic figure: for all his personal heroism, he has failed to recognize and understand the benefits of Romanization for himself and his people.²⁷

British readers, however, were not required to choose between Agricola or Calgacus. As the cultural heirs of the Roman empire and the racial heirs of the 'Britons, [. . .] Gauls [and] the rest of the Germans'²⁸ whom Calgacus hopes to unite behind him, Victorian readers could cherry-pick the best and most useful parts of the Roman imperial past and combine these with courage and fortitude of the Teutonic races.²⁹ Thus could mid-century commentators avoid simultaneously the problems of decline and degeneracy that were part of the Roman legacy, whilst simultaneously avoiding the perceived problem of a less civilized masculinity inherent in a purely Britannic past.³⁰ Whilst Mantena correctly observes that

25 Tacitus, *Agricola* 30.

26 See Späth (2012: 434) for more on Tacitean masculinity.

27 See Hingley (2000: 65–69).

28 Tacitus, *Agricola* 32.

29 See Bradley (2010: 143–44) for more on Tacitus's Victorian readership.

30 See also Hingley (2000) for more on nineteenth-century notions of racial hybridity and on the perception that 'the English were viewed as primarily Teutonic' while 'the ancient Britons were killed off or driven into the west of the country during the Anglo-Saxon invasion, where they had remained to form the modern Welsh and Cornish population'. (p. 63)

ancient Rome was never 'an absolute model for empire',³¹ Britain's own history as a subject of the Roman Empire actually enabled a much more useful narrative of racial and cultural hybridity as the credentials for imperial authority. It is within this context of liberal imperialist discourse that we can understand the significance of Rome in Wilkie Collins's *Antonina* which, as we have seen already, is so markedly different from the Roman fictions of Bulwer Lytton, Kingsley, and Newman. I suggest that Collins's first published novel enacts a mythologization of the British imperial race — as Virgil's *Aeneid* did for Romans under Augustus — and specifically of the racially hybrid 'imperial father'-figure of empire.

Taken separately, neither the Goths nor the Romans in Collins's novel can supply a Victorian readership with a wholly comfortable example of imperial success, or a set of national or masculine traits that would be stable enough to accommodate the liberal imperialist ideologies I have been describing. When describing the Roman elites, grown weak and lethargic on the spoils of empire, Collins uses the vocabulary of infirmity, imbecility, senility, and infancy to negate any hint of robust masculinity in this race, which has degenerated as its empire has grown decadent. At the opposite extreme, standards of Gothic manliness are so grimly militaristic that a man who is incapable of bearing arms is refused the right to a place in society and even to life itself. After the death of her child, for instance, Goisvintha resigns herself 'without an exclamation or a tear' to the harsh reality that her son 'could never have fought with the warriors! Our ancestors slew themselves when they were no longer vigorous for the fight. It is better that he has died!' (p. 15).

The novel's rejection of a purely Roman or purely Gothic ideal is echoed in the landscapes to which Collins confines each race. The harsh terrain of the Italian Alps, where the Gothic armies are massing ahead of their assault on Rome, is a direct reflection of the national character of the invaders, and the hardness and brutality which exist at the core of their culture:

No brightness gleamed from their armour; no banners waved over their heads; no music sounded among their ranks [...] all that the appearance of the Goths had of solemnity in itself, was in awful harmony with the cold and mournful aspect that the face of Nature had assumed. Silent – menacing – dark, – the army looked the fit embodiment of its leader's tremendous purpose – the subjugation of Rome. (pp. 6–7)

In Ravenna too the physical environment of the palace which sits at the centre of the Roman empire is described by Collins in terms that echo the masculine virtues — or lack thereof — of the Roman elites in AD410. 'No brilliant light', we are told, 'mars the pervading softness of the atmosphere; no violent colour materialises the light, ethereal hues of the dresses; no sudden noises interrupt the fitful and plaintive notes of the lute' (p. 22). The courtiers cannot tolerate even small sensory bombardments, let alone resist the imminent military assault from the Goths.

31 Mantena (2010: 70).

Neither the Romans, with their effeminate boy-emperor, nor the Goths seem likely to perpetuate themselves as a race for very much longer. In this sense Collins's decision to begin the novel with the death of Goisvintha's son is doubly significant since not only does it highlight the brutality of Gothic culture, but it also marks the end of a dynastic line, foregrounding from the first the novel's preoccupation with race and the consequences of race for imperial authority. The boy's murder shatters his mother's dream that she was 'destined to be the mother of a race of heroes' (p. 9). Goisvintha, as a fearsome defender of Gothic culture and racial purity, will never become an Aeneas-like progenitor of an imperial race. In the broader historical sense, the death of the child who would have been heir to the brutal customs of the Goths, marks the death knell for the less civilized societies of ancient Europe and, although none of the characters know it, the imminent arrival of a more modern, civilized and, crucially, a racially hybrid age. For the progenitors of this new age Victorian readers had to look neither to the Goths or the Romans in isolation, but to the heirs of Hermanric and Antonina, who would inherit at both a biological and cultural level the civilization of the Roman Empire coupled with Gothic vitality and vigour.

Antonina, we are told, has spent much of her life isolated from society, confined to the domestic sphere and cut off from the most decadent excesses of Roman culture by her father, who has forbidden her 'to enter a theatre, to look on sculpture, to read poetry, to listen to music' (p. 32). Her upbringing at the hands of a puritanical father is excessively strict, but it has helped to preserve in Antonina 'the Old Roman spirit' (p. 320) and the dutiful, self-sacrificing kind of femininity more characteristic of Livy's early Roman maidens than the 'listless' (p. 21), 'languid' (p. 22) women of Collins's fifth-century court. Antonina has almost no memory of her mother, but what she has gained from that brief maternal relationship is a 'love of music' (p. 69), which she must practice in secret so as not to offend her father's severe Christian convictions. In a significant break from what would become the conventional position of Oxford movement authors like Newman, Collins positions Christianity as exercising a restrictive, even destructive effect on refined Roman arts. By distancing Antonina from both her father and her uncle Ulpian, who embody the more fanatical impulses of Christianity and paganism respectively, Collins allocates to her the role of representing the cultural and artistic accomplishments of ancient Roman civilization before its descent into decadence, as well as ascribing to her all the domestic virtues praised as part of a mid-Victorian stereotype of femininity.³² These are qualities which Antonina would pass on, both biologically and culturally, to any children she might bear.

Where Collins disassociates Antonina from the negative associations of Roman decadence and decline, so too is Hermanric distanced from the more brutal aspects of Gothic civilization. Hermanric's masculine qualities, though they are, as we shall

32 See Cohen (1998) on ideals of Victorian domesticity. Tosh (1999) also offers a useful analysis of domesticity and its relationship to mid-century masculinity.

see, a source of emotional crisis and conflicted identity for the warrior in AD410, would have been instantly recognizable to a nineteenth-century reader as idealized gender traits. Physically, Hermanric possesses all the prowess and vitality that writers of empire had begun to praise more insistently as the British Empire demanded strong, healthy soldiers to continue its expansion in difficult climates and terrains.³³ The physical appeal of the Goth is not lost on Antonina who, when she is first brought before Hermanric, is struck by 'the manly and powerful frame of the young warrior, clothed as it was in the accoutrements of his war-like nation' (p. 136). 'You are not like the soldiers of Rome', she observes to her captor; '— you are taller, stronger, more gloriously arrayed [. . .] you have a look of conquest and a presence of command' (p. 136). Yet Hermanric is not held up as a paragon of masculine virtue in the novel solely on account of his physical prowess, but also for his 'almost sublime' (p. 8) capacity for human affection. Thus when he is confronted with the sight of his mortally wounded nephew:

The face and manner of the young man (he had numbered only twenty years) expressed a deep sorrow; manly in its stern tranquillity; sincere in its perfect innocence of display. As he looked on the child, his blue eyes — bright, piercing, and lively — softened like a woman's; his lips, hardly hidden by his short beard, closed and quivered and his chest heaved under the armour that lay upon its noble proportions. (p. 8)

Hermanric demonstrates the kind of overt emotional concern for the child that Romantic and Evangelical depictions of family life had designated as belonging to the mother and to the feminine sphere. Yet in his combination of womanly physical manifestations of grief and 'manly' endeavour to control the expression of these emotions, Hermanric bears a striking resemblance to descriptions of the mid-century paternal archetype that John Tosh has called the 'intimate father'. This figure is characterized by a 'tenderness and familiarity' towards children, but one which is 'balanced by a respect for discipline and routine'.³⁴ In a further break from earlier novelistic conventions, Collins enlists the cultural power of the intimate father figure to ensure that Hermanric's masculine virtue is enhanced, in the eyes of his readers, precisely because it is balanced, moderate and compatible with contemporary ideologies of domesticity and race.

That we are meant to understand the relationship between Hermanric and Antonina in terms of explicitly sexual — and therefore racial — union, is evident from Collins's couching of Hermanric's death scene in the imagery of lost virginity. When the Huns burst into the farmhouse and stab Hermanric in sight of Antonina, she is overcome by the violence of the act and 'falls insensible by the side of her young warrior — her dress was spattered with his blood' (p. 241). The metaphorical

33 Hardy, physical masculinity would become the defining characteristic of New Imperialist masculine ideals during the high imperial period of 1870–1914, as the project of expanding and defending the empire reached its zenith. See Deane (2014).

34 Tosh (1999: 99).

deflowering of Antonina is sanctioned upon her return to Rome by her father, who acknowledges Hermanric as ‘a son that has been taken from me’ (p. 267), thereby legitimizing in the minds of the reader any heirs which might have been born to them. The farmhouse setting too is significant:

Far from being melancholy, there was something soothing and attractive about the loneliness of the deserted farm [...] As Antonina beheld the brightened fields and the shadowed woods, here mingled, there succeeding each other [...] that eloquent voice of nature, whose audience is the human heart, and whose theme is eternal love, spoke inspiringly to her attentive senses. (p. 191).

In contrast to the barrenness of the Alps or the flimsy softness of the palace at Ravenna, the isolated farmhouse is a place of colour, growth, and rebirth. There are undertones here of the Romantic Italian landscapes of William Collins, but their function is not to close down the relevance of Rome as a departed, if beautiful, ruin. Rather, Collins identifies this as a site of potential union and fruitfulness, both physical and racial. Collins even finds Christian religious discourses — usually so hostile to the Roman legacy — with which to reinforce his insistence upon the pivotal nature of this meeting of two races. ‘Have you never thought’, Antonina asks Hermanric as they survey the landscape; ‘that light and air, and the perfume of flowers, might contain some relics of the beauties of Eden?’ (p. 191). The reference to Adam and Eve — yet another set of mythological parent-figures, this time from the Christian tradition — adds a religious endorsement to the desirability of the couple’s union.

Certainly Antonina finds the prospect of racial union a more peaceful and unproblematic prospect than Hermanric. For Hermanric, caught as he is between the past and the future, between Goisvintha and Antonina and the very different sets of national values and gender ideals they represent, the struggle to break with his cultural roots and to adapt in pursuit of a more civilized masculinity is a difficult and ideologically dangerous one, since it requires him to gamble with his own sense of masculine identity and subjectivity. By loving Antonina, Hermanric risks his standing in an elite male society in which romantic sentiment and affection are ‘numbered with the base inferior passions’ (p. 122). He soon finds himself tormented ‘with visions of the impatient army, spurred at length into ferocious action [...] and forcing him back for ever into their avenging ranks’ (p. 231). It is a nightmarish image of individual masculinity overwhelmed by the collective identity of the nation. It also implies the regression or degeneration of civilization, with Hermanric being dragged backwards through time and absorbed into what we are invited to interpret as a less civilized past. Hermanric’s indecision is as much a cultural and historical paralysis as it is a personal one, torn as he is between the love of Antonina and that of his sister Goisvintha, and suspended in history between the ancient world, with its excesses of brutality and decadence, and a modern Europe peopled by a superior hybrid race which only his own union with Antonina can produce.

Hermanric's refusal to comply with the stringent masculine codes of his own people eventually becomes intolerable to Goisvintha, who punishes her brother with symbolic emasculation. Yet the fact that Hermanric is murdered before any physical consummation of his union with Antonina does not close down the novel's promise of an ideal hybrid race. Rather, Collins uses the death of Hermanric and the tragic separation of the lovers to mythologize a notion of an imperial destiny for Britain and the British male. The heirs that Antonina and Hermanric would have produced in a single generation might not have come to fruition in the novel itself, it is suggested, but the migration, intermarriage and gradual assimilation of their respective cultures over the course of fifteen hundred years, have eventually produced the same qualities in the British race. Thus does Collins describe Hermanric's first meeting with Antonina as amounting to 'A new page in the history of humanity' (p. 132). It is not overreaching, then, to suggest that Collins was aware of the reception conventions which governed the treatment of Rome in the antique novel, and the meanings assigned to the Roman legacy in that form, but that he knowingly reshapes and repurposes those legacies to interject in contemporary discourses about race and empire and, ultimately, facilitates a founding narrative of the British male, his Romano-Germanic heritage, and his cultural and racial credentials for imperial rule.

With several important treatises on race appearing in or around the year that *Antonina* was published, the shift in mid-Victorian racial discourses is crucial for understanding the changing significance of ancient Rome from the 1850s and 1860s. Theories of race offered a means of explaining physical and cultural differences between Britain and the many new peoples being brought under British imperial rule, as well as a means of justifying (in the eyes of pro-imperial commentators) that rule on the grounds of Britain's more advanced civilization. Robert Knox's *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (1850) insisted that 'in human history, race is everything'.³⁵ His comments echo the sentiments found in Benjamin Disraeli's *Tancred* (1847), which includes the frequently-quoted assertion that 'All is race; there is no other truth'.³⁶ It is through such writings that we find the French revolutionary associations of a purely Roman parallel becoming tempered by more Germanic pasts. For Knox, the similarities between Roman and Napoleonic rule were abundantly evident across all aspects of imperial policy and cultural enterprise. 'Roman dominion over the cities of Northern Africa', he writes, to quote just one example, 'amounted merely to a military occupation, much as the French rule in Corsica; or, in other words, that these cities were to Rome what those of Corsica are to present day France'.³⁷ The introduction of Germanic/Scandinavian culture into Roman

35 Knox (1850: 10). For more on theories of hybridity see Young (2005).

36 Disraeli (1847: 169).

37 Knox (1850: 206).

society, however, produced a very different set of racial and cultural ideals and a higher form of ‘civilization’:

The introduction of the Saxon element of mind into civilized Europe is, no doubt, a remarkable event in history: the literature and arts of the Roman world had been already influenced by the Celtic mind; the Gothic or Slavonian followed next; then came the Saxon [. . .] Free and bold men who originally brought with them, in all their migrations from Scandinavia, those free institutions under which freemen alone can live, namely that of trial by jury, and equality before the law, protection of life and property; a race who obeyed no king or chief; who resisted oppression in every shape.³⁸

Here we find the more problematic elements of the Roman parallel — the revolutionary connections, the association with slavery and the oppression of freedom, and the notion of inevitable decline and fall of civilization — ameliorated through an insistence upon a hybrid Romano–Saxon identity for the British race. Britain is positioned as the cultural heir of the Roman literature and the arts, whilst also benefitting from the legal and constitutional freedoms of Saxon society. It was a notion that continued to appeal to Victorian writers for decades to come. Matthew Arnold in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) praised the racial and cultural influences of ‘the Celtic peoples who are blended with us’, whilst also claiming a classical inheritance for the British race, who ‘inherited the great Greek and Roman oratorical tradition more than the orators of any other country’.³⁹ It is also a narrative which sits at the heart of works from a variety of disciplines specifically about ancient Rome, from John Collingwood Bruce’s *The Roman Wall* (1851) and J.G. Sheppard’s *The Fall of Rome and the Rise of New Nationalities* (1861), to Charles Kingsley’s lectures on race in *The Roman and the Teuton* (1864). Most importantly for the purposes of this article, however, it is a narrative of Romano–Germanic union which is embodied in the figures of Antonina and Hermanric, and which marks a pivotal moment of reappropriation of Rome as an ancestor, rather than an enemy of British values.

By the high-imperial period of 1870–1914, ancient Rome would become a primary framework for talking about the empire. The Royal Titles Bill — which proclaimed Victoria Empress of India — would lend official sanction to the notion of the British Empire as a new and improved Roman Empire, and the British Imperialist as a new Roman.⁴⁰ The violence and anxiety of the French Revolution were a distant memory, although the final decades of the century

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 0–51.

³⁹ Arnold (1867: viii; 118).

⁴⁰ Sir George Bowyer, for instance, spoke in the House of Commons on the fitting nature of the Roman parallel as a reflection of Queen Victoria’s power: ‘History’, he said, ‘showed that the title of Emperor was derived from the Roman Empire – from Caesar; and the idea of a Roman Emperor was that of a King over other Kings, a potentate who had for subjects tributary Kings [. . .] In India the Queen was undoubtedly the Sovereign over Sovereign Princes’. HC Debate, 17 February 1876, vol.227, cc.407–28 (c.419).

would also witness the growth of Prussian aggression in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War, and the unification of Germany. The result for literary and cultural receptions of Rome was the emergence of a more purely Roman parallel, differentiated and distanced from the Germanic or Teutonic hybridity of much mid-century writing. I have argued that such a striking turnabout in Victorian receptions of Rome, from early rejection and vilification to enthusiastic adoption as an imperial ideal, was catalysed and made possible by mid-century novels like Collins's *Antonina* and by contemporary theorists of race and empire who reconfigured the Roman legacy from one of degeneration and political violence to one of imperial splendour and masculine vigour.

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