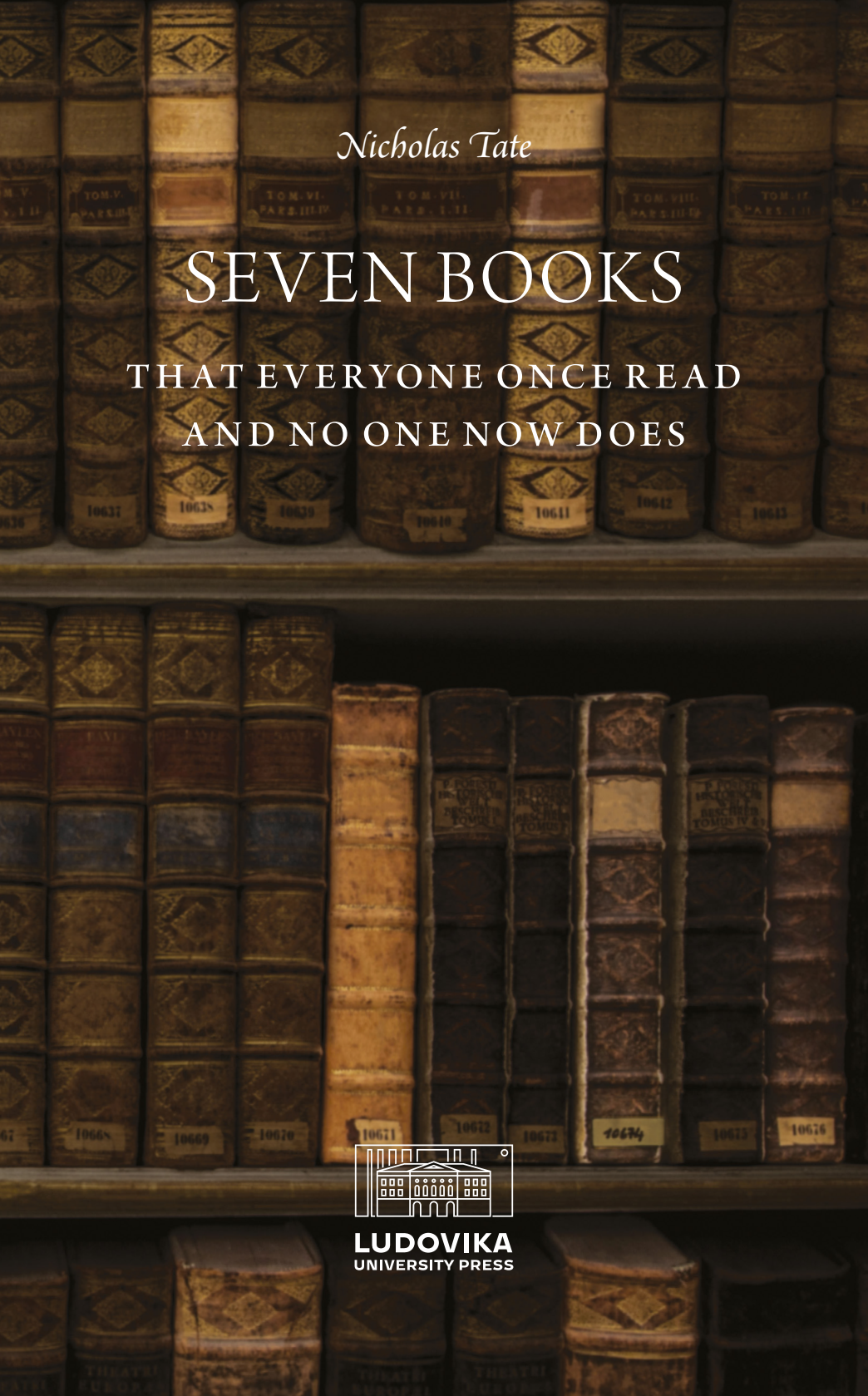


Nicholas Tate

SEVEN BOOKS

THAT EVERYONE ONCE READ AND NO ONE NOW DOES

LUDOVIKA
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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SEVEN BOOKS
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INTRODUCTION: SEVEN BOOKS THAT 'EVERYONE' ONCE READ (OR AT LEAST HAD HEARD OF)

This is a book about books. It is a book about seven books that, during certain periods in the past, were read by, or at least familiar to, a large proportion of the literate population within the societies in which they circulated. It is also about the books that helped to shape these seven books and the other books that the seven shaped in their turn. When I use the term 'books', I also include written materials prior to the invention of the printing press, such as papyri and manuscripts.

In three cases, the book was well-known and in use for over a millennium. Cicero's *On Duties* (*De Officiis*) was in continuous circulation and active use from the first century BC until the nineteenth century, with the exception of the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire. In the eighteenth century, it was still being described as a 'work that every German student without exception reads in his youth' and recommended to all Anglican clergy as a way of giving their minds 'a noble Sett'.[1] Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* may have disappeared from Western Europe in the Middle Ages, but from the Renaissance until the middle of the nineteenth century, it taught whole generations of the upper classes to reflect on the qualities needed for leadership. Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely read Latin texts in monastic and cathedral schools in the Middle Ages, from the ninth century through to the fifteenth, and continued to influence some of Europe's greatest writers and thinkers into the twentieth century.

In the case of the four other books, the periods in which they had prominence were shorter but the degree of prominence during these periods was sometimes greater. The Victorian revival of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was so extensive that secondary school English teachers in England could be told in the early twentieth century to *take it for granted* that children coming from English elementary schools had already read most of Malory's text.[2] Bunyan's

[1] See p. 46.
[2] See p. 169.

The Pilgrim's Progress became a foundational text for the English working-class movement and has a good claim, after the Bible and Shakespeare, to be the world's most widely circulated book, with translations into over two hundred languages between its publication in the late seventeenth century and the present day. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* became one of the best-known historical works of all time, with Gibbon a successor to Thucydides and Tacitus, and in literate homes, a household name. As late as the 1960s, when the current author went up to Oxford, the book was still compulsory reading for all undergraduates studying Modern History. Walter Scott's *Waverley* and its successor novels were so popular in the nineteenth century that 'Waverley' became an everyday word, with towns, districts, streets, and houses named after it all over the English-speaking world. The current author lived in both a house and a district of that name, like many people, not fully appreciating at the time why these were so called.

These are seven works that should figure prominently in any history of mentalities – not just in the British Isles but in most cases in continental Europe and the USA as well. Yet few or none are now widely read or talked about outside the scholarly communities that guard them from the wider neglect. They are no longer household names. There may well be more copies in circulation than ever before – the result of demographic growth, more literate societies, and the expansion of universities – but ask educated persons of your acquaintance, including those with a humanities degree, and you will be lucky to find that they have read any of them. They exist on the margins of our contemporary world in libraries and universities, especially in North America, the 'cherished after-glow' of a forgotten culture, but have disappeared from our daily lives and common stock of cultural reference (Steiner, 1971, p. 86). If one accepts Italo Calvino's definition of a 'classic' as 'a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off', I am not so sure in some of our seven texts how often these days the particles from that cloud are dispersed (Calvino, 1999, p. 6).

I have written this book partly to encourage a wider audience to see what it can find of interest in a group of works that have shaped the consciousness of so many people in Europe and beyond. All seven texts are worth reading or re-reading on their own merits. Some reasons for their past popularity have not gone away. Fresh ones appear as new generations of readers see qualities in the works not apparent in earlier times. Looking across this very disparate group of texts gives one a comparative perspective on how they

were 'received' by subsequent generations of readers, the reasons for the rise and fall of their popularity, and thus insights into the intellectual history of those societies in which they were read.

A WEB OF CONNECTIONS

There are many interconnections both among the seven texts and among their seven authors. One of Plutarch's *Lives* was of Cicero, who was also one of the earlier Latin authors studied most closely by Boethius. Gibbon rated Plutarch highly, wrote admiringly about Boethius in *Decline and Fall,* and learned Latin through reading Cicero, commissioning a bust of him in black Wedgwood to put in his library in Lausanne. Scott, after years of Cicero at school, expressed himself in English in a Ciceronian style, praised a new edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* and was fascinated by Arthurian legends, describing *Le Morte Darthur* as a work 'with a simplicity bordering upon the sublime'.

Many other readers of the seven texts, where we know of their existence, were also familiar with more than one of them. For Erasmus, both Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Cicero's *On Duties* were among the few texts future princes should be obliged to read (Erasmus, 1986, p. 251). The Poet Laureate Robert Southey brought out new editions of both *Le Morte Darthur* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* and saw Boethius as one of 'the mighty minds of old', 'the never-failing friends … with whom I converse day by day'.[3] The young Lord Carnarvon, travelling in the wilder parts of the Ottoman Empire in 1853, carried with him two large folio volumes of Gibbon and a plentiful supply of the works of his great favourite Walter Scott (Maxwell, 2001, p. 462). Even in fiction, as in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair,* one can find sets of Gibbon and Scott side by side, with doubts in this case whether either had ever been read (Greene, 1962, p. 13). Across the Atlantic, Mark Twain reacted negatively to Malory, Scott, and medievalism generally, though positive echoes of Bunyan are to be found in his works, while John Steinbeck admired both Malory and Bunyan, as their influence in his novels *Tortilla Flat* and *The Grapes of Wrath,* respectively, indicates.

The pattern of interactions between individual texts and the artists and public figures who read and responded to them is even more extensive. Erasmus,

[3] See p. 125.

in one of his writings, creates a character, who sounds like himself, who could not read *On Obligations* 'without sometimes kissing the book and blessing (Cicero's) pure heart'. Boethius was translated by two English monarchs, Alfred and Elizabeth I. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* accompanied Charlotte Corday *en route* to murdering Marat in his bath. *Le Morte Darthur* was loved so much by the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones that 'it became literally a part of himself',[4] while T. E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia'), carrying a copy in his camel's saddlebags when fighting in the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in The First World War, reported that it 'relieved (his) disgust' at the squalid conditions in which he was sometimes lodged (Lawrence, 1940, p. 495). *The Pilgrim's Progress* shaped the work of both William Blake and Enid Blyton. For Iggy Pop, the punk singer and songwriter, Gibbon was the 'heavy dude' whose *Decline and Fall* had rescued him from the tyranny of the present. George Eliot devoured *Waverley* with passion at the age of eight while Irvine Welsh denounced Scott as an 'arse-licker' of no literary significance. These are books that, over centuries, and even millennia have woven a complex web of multi-directional connections between texts, authors, and readers. This book aims to trace these connections and to show what they tell us about the culture and civilisation of which these books are a part.

All seven books were shaped by earlier books and in their turn shaped later books, in some cases, very large numbers of later books. *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Waverley* probably had the widest influence on later authors and, in the case of the whole series of Scott's *Waverley* novels, across many countries and languages. Sometimes, the influence was direct and precise, sometimes, more general in terms of tone, approach, and subject matter. The connections also often extended a long way forwards and backwards. Malory, for example, reworked a large number of earlier texts, which, in their turn, had been shaped by even earlier writers of Arthurian legends and by earlier historians who had similarly depended on the work of their predecessors. *Le Morte Darthur* in its turn helped to inspire Tennyson's early Arthurian poems, which shaped the work of poets such as William Morris, whose use of Arthurian themes went on to stimulate their adoption in the visual arts among the pre-Raphaelites. In some cases, the link between the original text and the outermost extent of its influence can become very tenuous; for instance, Bunyan's invention of the name 'Vanity Fair' has, over the years, turned into a metaphor bearing little or no relation to its original

[4] See p. 167.

meaning (Milne, 2015). The image of a large web of connections – with threads running off in different directions but, when viewed from a distance, beginning to form a picture – is an apt one. It is also this web of connections that makes applicable to all seven of the texts under examination another of Italo Calvino's definitions of 'a classic':

> The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed. (Calvino, 1999, p. 5)

THE 'AFTERLIFE' OF A BOOK

But identifying which famous people read or commented on which books and which books can be seen to have influenced which subsequent books is only a small part of the extraordinarily difficult task of assessing a book's impact. For most earlier periods, we have little reliable data for the numbers of books or manuscripts in circulation, as opposed to the numbers which have survived in archives. Jumping to conclusions from a book's twenty-first-century archival presence is also a dangerous occupation: the more popular the text, the more likely it was to be 'simply read to pieces', especially if it was one of the cheap abridged versions of some of our seven texts that were in circulation (Smyth, 2018, pp. 56–57). Even where we have data, these are usually highly partial with regard to what sorts of people bought or owned the book, and we know even less, except where we have marginal comments, letters, diaries, and autobiographies, whether and how they read the book and what effect it had on them.[5]

An effect of printing was the creation of large numbers of books that ended up never being read (Smyth, 2018, p. 87). The many uncut versions of nineteenth-century books one finds in second-hand bookshops, and the

[5] Stephen Orgel's study of readers' marginal annotations in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books concludes that these can often tell us what readers were looking for in a text. The marginalia he has studied show less evidence of readers expressing their enjoyment of a text than of them using the text to educate themselves through identifying its features and commenting on and disputing what is being said (2015, pp. 18, 102). Adam Smyth similarly comments that reader annotations suggest that the purpose of reading was generally assumed to be a utilitarian one (2018, p. 105).

uncut state in which I found one of my own Victorian copies of *The Pilgrim's Progress* when I finally took it off its shelf, suggest that ownership did not necessarily lead to reading or at least to reading the whole text. The work of Abigail Williams on eighteenth-century reading in England has revealed how some types of books were often read for isolated passages rather than from cover to cover (Williams, 2017, pp. 215, 254). And when one is thinking about a book's impact, one should remember all those people who may have read a book but are not at all sure whether they did or, even if they think they did, may remember little or nothing about it (though that, of course, does not exclude them from having been influenced by it at the time). The author of this book is not the only reader who has read most of a book only to realise, not far from the end, that he has read it before. Montaigne's solution to this problem, and to help his 'defective and treacherous memory a little,' was to add at the end of books he intended to read only once the date when he had finished reading the book and his judgement about it (Montaigne, 2003, pp. 469–470). I always do the former in pencil, whether or not I think I might read it again (and I very rarely at that point think I will); however, I refrain from the latter given that I have what Stephen Orgel has described as the distinctively modern preoccupation with pristine, unmarked books, something he found to be quite alien to early print culture (Orgel, 2015, p. 25).

What we are usually most interested in and have the greatest difficulty finding out, at least across large groups of readers and before modern times, is how people reacted to a book and how it influenced their views and lives. All we have are hints and traces on which it is dangerous to build general statements. Where we do have evidence about people's reading, as with some of the leading French revolutionaries who quoted Plutarch regularly in assemblies and newspapers, hard conclusions can sometimes be reached. In this case, reading Plutarch was almost certainly not the main impetus to revolutionary activity; it was not so much Plutarch's own ideas that were influencing revolutionaries but that he was a useful source of information about the ancient world and of analogies to use in speeches and articles.[6] Many of the claims over the centuries that certain books caused immoral and anti-social behaviour – whether Roger Ascham's complaint that reading *Le Morte Darthur* led to adultery at Elizabeth I's court or the spate of suicides alleged to have followed the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* – are similarly rarely backed up with any evidence (Furedi, 2015, p. 124).

6 See p. 61.

Books were often also used for purposes remote from their authors' intentions. Cicero's *On Duties* was more often in the Middle Ages a source for Latin grammar and style than for its ethical ideas. A prison doctor prescribed Boethius's *Consolation* to Casanova as a cure for melancholy. An elderly Racine was press-ganged into reading *Parallel Lives* late at night to Louis XIV to curb his insomnia; the revolutionary Madame Roland as a girl smuggled it into church in lieu of a prayer book; and Beethoven (allegedly) turned to it for consolation on his deathbed. Heavily bowdlerised versions of *Le Morte Darthur* were used in the early twentieth century as manuals of moral instruction for pupils in English state schools. Winston Churchill so liked Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* that, as Home Secretary, he prescribed its circulation to prisons as part of their programmes for rehabilitation, with unintended effects.[7] Some books also reappear as objects within other literary works. In a Molière play, *un gros Plutarque* does service as a heavy weight for pressing collars (Molière, 2010, p. 565). The hero of John Cowper Powys's *Maiden Castle* props open a Dorchester attic window with a copy of *Le Morte Darthur* (Powys, 1937, p. 102). Even more bizarrely, a 'large, elegant, limited edition' of Boethius's *Consolation,* constantly mentioned and passed between characters in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces,* is used variously as a weapon in a fight in a New Orleans men's public lavatory, a means of hiding the face of a woman posing lasciviously for a pornographic photograph, and a sharp object with which the obese Boethian hero's mother is able to poke him in the stomach (Toole, 1981, pp. 164–165, 247, 291–292).[8]

But the 'afterlife' of books extends in other ways. Busts of Cicero have furnished many rooms and libraries other than Gibbon's. A marble one presided over the London library of Lord Chesterfield, whose letters to his son were based on Cicero's *On Duties.* Boethius, remembered now almost entirely for his *Consolation,* survives for all eternity in the name of a crater on Mercury. Malory's Merlin, protean as ever, has reappeared at the time of writing as a meet-and-greet character in Disneyland, where, once greeted by the magician from *Le Morte Darthur,* one has the option of moving on to the attractions of

7 See p. 225.

8 One of the most striking contemporary examples of a book as object playing a role within fiction is in the second part of Roberto Bolaño's massive work *2666,* in which an academic symposium on geometry, that the main character cannot remember ever having purchased, is left indefinitely pegged on a washing line in an experiment, prompted by memories of a Marcel Duchamp *readymade,* to see what impact the world has on a book as opposed to enquiring what impact the book has had on the world (Bolaño, 2005, pp. 239–247).

the King Arthur Carrousel. *The Pilgrim's Progress* has lived on in a Cheshire Bunyan theme park laid out in Victorian times and still open to the public. Like Malory's knights of the Round Table, Bunyan's Pilgrims have helped both wallpaper and jigsaw manufacturers to add new lines to their catalogues. *Waverley*'s footprint, and its author's alongside it, are probably the largest. Few books have had so many places named after them or can boast their own steamer, bar, and hotel. Few authors have a 200-foot monument built in their honour on one side of the Atlantic (the Scott Monument in Edinburgh's Princes Street) and a larger-than-life statue on the other (in New York's Central Park).

Subsequent chapters explore all the aspects of each book's 'afterlife' and, where evidence is available, try to estimate the extent to which each penetrated the consciousness of different groups of people at different times and different places, including – as in the cases of Malory, Bunyan, and Scott – many who have never read it, seen a copy, or even realised that a book was at the source of whatever cultural artefact (toy, colouring book, board game, print, Disneyland character) they were encountering. For Calvino, this is another defining characteristic of 'classics': books 'which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious' (Calvino, 1999, p. 4).

THE MEANS OF TRANSMISSION

The book also explores the different mechanisms of transmission by which books have been passed on through the generations and survived all the major political, social, economic, and cultural changes that might have swept them away and which, in recent times, have finally succeeded in doing so. In some cases, it is individuals who rated the works highly, and in one or two cases, stood to benefit financially from their circulation, who have played a major role. Without the Byzantine monk Maximus Planudes in the thirteenth century, translators Jacques Amyot and Thomas North in the sixteenth century, and John Dryden, editor of a new English edition in the seventeenth century, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* would not have had the impact on European elites from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries that it did. King Alfred (if indeed it really was he), Chaucer, and in France, Jean de Meun, were central to the continued circulation of manuscript copies of Boethius during the Middle Ages and to its exposure to a wider vernacular audience. Caxton was crucial

for the initial survival of *Le Morte Darthur* at the end of the fifteenth century and Scott, Southey, and Tennyson for its Victorian revival.

In the case of some books, it was their use in schools, universities, and by private tutors that played a central part in their transmission. *On Duties* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* over many centuries reached most people – overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, boys and young men – through their use in education. Plutarch was less used in schools but, for long periods, was seen as an important part of a gentleman's – and sometimes, especially in the eighteenth century, a gentlewoman's – informal education. Malory was standard fare in English state schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scott did not need the help of schools in promoting his books: for much of the first half of the nineteenth century, it was just assumed that any educated person, from Dublin to St Petersburg, from Naples to Stockholm, and from Boston to St Louis, would be reading him. Some of these books used for educational purposes, and some in more general circulation, would have been adapted, abridged, or bowdlerised. Passages were also cut out and inserted into anthologies alongside extracts from other works. There must have been many readers whose knowledge of Cicero's *On Duties* was confined to a few gobbets they had studied for points of grammar, read Gibbon in a censored version, or thought they had bought a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* when all they could afford was a version telling the story through illustrations.

One of the striking patterns that emerges from looking at the 'reception' of these books is the early age at which many of them were read. Passages in Latin from Cicero and Boethius were commonly read in schools long before adolescence. Lord Chesterfield expected his son Philip to read *On Duties* in Latin at seven years old and, while absorbing its moral messages, appreciate its syntax at the same time. Rousseau, with typical overstatement, claimed to have been able to recite the whole of Plutarch at the age of eight. William Morris is supposed to have read all of the Waverley novels by seven years old. At the age of twelve, Karen Blixen was translating passages from Scott into Danish while Dostoyevsky was reading all of his novels in a single vacation. T. S. Eliot's reading of a boys' version of Malory at the age of eleven or twelve seems positively backward by comparison. The contrast with the reading material available in contemporary primary and lower secondary schools could not be more striking, though the extent to which non-exceptional individuals, unlike those named above, absorbed most of the meaning of what they read may not be so clear.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS IN THE RECEPTION OF TEXTS

In the case of each book, central questions will be the reasons both for its popularity and longevity and for its current banishment to the margins of our cultural consciousness.

In the case of the 'reception' of each book, one can distinguish both push and pull factors (Rigney, 2012, p. 12). Push factors are those elements of the book most likely to make it attractive to the reader. These may range from its title and the name and reputation of its author to features of its language and structure and aspects of its content. Attitudes towards Cicero the man, both reverence for his nobility and courage and, following the rediscovery of his letters in the fourteenth century, contempt for his occasional weakness and self-pity, influenced responses to his writings. Gibbon's distinctive irony in *Decline and Fall* – part of its great appeal to the current author – attracted some and repelled others; repulsion in some cases was perhaps deepened by opinions circulating about Gibbon the man. If more had been known of Malory the man – recidivist law-breaker, alleged rapist, plunderer of church properties, long-term prisoner – it is difficult to imagine that *Le Morte Darthur* would have attracted so many ardent readers in Victorian times. Boethius's *Consolation* survived far longer than all his other works both because it addressed perennial human issues, key matters of life and death – as all the other books do to varying degrees – and because, in a Christian world, it was an ancient Latin text unusually written by someone who was a Christian and an alleged martyr to boot. The fact that he had written it in prison – as Bunyan and Malory also did – gave it an added distinctiveness.

The push factors of books cannot be examined separately from the pull ones. If one is a Christian reader hoping to find views on free will and predestination with the authority of the ancient world behind them, the popularity of Boethius, a Christian author, is understandable even though the distinctively Christian content of the *Consolation* is highly limited. The pull factor enables one to see one of the book's push factors in its most favourable light. By contrast, Boethius's late Latin style – a push factor when comparisons were being made with writers even further removed from the golden age of Latin prose – ceased to pull in the same way once humanists in the fifteenth century rediscovered classical texts, such as Cicero's letters, which began to make Boethius's Latin look clumsy and old-fashioned.

The pull factors that have shaped the perceptions of these seven books are as many and varied as the contexts in which the books were 'received'. What are the characteristics of Victorian England that made the figure of King Arthur and the story of Tristan and Isolde so attractive to authors, painters, readers, and viewers, that clearly did not exist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Malory, and Arthurian legends generally, almost completely disappeared from view? Why, improbably at first sight, did the Taiping rebels in China in the 1850s and 1860s feel that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a book that spoke to their cause? What were the factors that explain why some of Scott's *Waverley* novels resonated so powerfully in the mid-nineteenth century with Hungarians, Slovenes, Czechs, Poles, and Catalans and, in the decades before 1990, with readers in Russia and East Germany, at a time when, in Britain, Scott had become deeply unfashionable? Political, social, cultural, and religious factors, as well as influential readers and critics of these books (Montaigne on Plutarch, Tennyson on Malory, György Lukács on Scott), all had a role to play at different times and in different places; they will all be addressed in each of the subsequent chapters.

A similar, though this time negative, pattern of factors – internal ones pushing outwards from the book, external ones drawing readers away from the book – helps to explain the waning of appeal and influence that these books have experienced in recent times. Why does no one in schools read Boethius, Plutarch, or Malory any more? Why do modern history undergraduates no longer have to read Gibbon at Oxford, Cambridge, and beyond? Why has *The Pilgrim's Progress* become 'one of the most spectacularly untrendy works in the Canon' and 'all but vanished from contemporary bookshelves'? Why has Scott become 'the Great Unread'? There are both specific and general explanations for the marginalisation and fossilisation of these seven books. The final two chapters draw these explanations together and consider the implications for the contemporary world of these weakening literary links with the past (Milne, 2015, pp. 5, 10; Rigney, 2012, pp. 210–214).

AUTHORS AND THEIR LIBRARIES

Since this is a book about books and their place in our culture, it also looks at what the seven authors felt about books, how they used them, their views about reading, and the approaches which might be used when reading their books. For all seven writers, books were extremely important. Malory, the

most un-scholarly and un-literary of the seven, and Bunyan, by far and away the poorest, had fewer opportunities to access books than any of the other writers, not least because of their long periods of imprisonment. Despite this, Malory based *Le Morte Darthur* on many different English and French Arthurian texts and shows influences from a range of other medieval authors. Further, Bunyan made use of demanding theological texts such as Martin Luther's voluminous preface to St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, in addition to the Bible, the centre of all his writing and his life. Cicero, Boethius, Gibbon, and Scott had well-attested libraries, and Plutarch only managed to write *Parallel Lives* thanks to being able to consult large numbers of Greek and Latin sources on a wide range of subjects. Cicero built up libraries in his villas and had slaves and freedmen to catalogue their holdings, in addition to consulting the libraries of other well-known Romans. Boethius, despite living in an Italy that had fallen to the 'barbarian' Ostrogoths, still had access to a library whose walls were 'adorned with ivory and glass'. In Gibbon's case, we know quite a lot about the contents of his libraries both in London and Lausanne. The enormous scope of *The Decline and Fall* meant that he must have spent a large amount of time in both of them. For Scott, whose novels are packed with references to other people's books, the massive antiquarian collection in his library at Abbotsford in the Scottish Borders was in active use throughout his life and – unique among these libraries – a place one is still able to visit today. The role of the text in the lives of such a varied group of authors – whether in the form of papyri, manuscripts or the printed word – is a testimony to its centrality in the consciousness of educated people over more than two millennia. For most of the seven authors, it is likely that, for at least some of the time, source texts they were studying would have been read aloud to them. It is a custom, together with reading aloud to oneself, that was much more common for the first four authors, all of whom wrote before the introduction of printing; they existed in a more oral culture, at a time when texts were both more difficult to obtain and, in some cases, cumbersome to hold. All seven authors will have written their works by hand or, at least in the case of Cicero and Scott (and probably Plutarch), made use of dictation.

As the author of this book about books, in subsequent chapters, I also refer at times to my own encounter with the physical copies of the texts I am examining and to my own reactions as a reader, both to these texts and in some cases to other texts associated with them. It has not just been the obvious differences made by a choice of translator that have struck me but also the impact on me of the different physical copies I have owned or used: the

old, the new, the handed-down, the gifted and inscribed, the inherited, the cheap, the falling apart, the well-made, the un-cut, the plain, the illustrated, the welcoming, the off-putting, the well-thumbed, the annotated, the second-hand with their traces of former owners, the ones full of memories, the ones I had forgotten I had ever read, the ones I never knew I had, the ones I now know I shall never read.[9] There has been much academic discussion in recent years on the 'materiality' of texts – features such as format, size, typography, use of space, binding, illustrations – and on the 'symbolic power' of these features. It has certainly been my own experience that all these aspects of a literary work can be meaningful and potentially significant in relation to my response (Smyth, 2018, pp. 10, 13, 177). Where appropriate, I point this out.

WHY THESE SEVEN TEXTS?

I look at the seven works and their authors in chronological order. The last one – Scott – wrote mostly in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. I did not include any authors nearer the present day as I wished to survey the reputation of books over a period of at least a hundred and fifty years to identify long-term patterns of popularity and decline. My main criterion for inclusion was that the book had once been hugely popular for a substantial period of time, not just a brilliant flash in the pan. Once that was met, apart from wanting a broad spread across the ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern worlds in Europe, the main reason for choice was whether I was interested in and attracted by the text in question. The choice is therefore to a degree idiosyncratic: a very different selection of books from those four time periods could quite easily have been chosen.

Despite most, if not all, of these texts having had large numbers of female readers, all seven had male authors. The absence of female authors is the result of selecting texts based on the criterion of having been very widely read over long periods of time. The failure to meet this criterion and the consequent absence of any examples of the excellent work of female authors is eloquent testimony to a defining feature of the past two thousand years. At the end of the period covered by the seven texts, one might have included Jane Austen

[9] Theodore Dalrymple's *These Spindrift Pages,* a book about the thoughts that spring from looking through the books in the author's library, reminisces about second-hand bookshops and books he has bought with traces of their previous owners.

had she not so signally failed to meet the other criterion for inclusion – that of subsequent neglect.

I had read all the texts before thinking of writing this book, with the exception of Cicero's *On Duties.* I had read some Cicero in translation but did not even know of the existence of *On Duties* until, reading books about classical reception, I came to realise how extraordinarily wide and long its influence had been. I had been prompted to read Boethius because I had heard of its importance but did not enjoy my first reading of a free online version translated in Victorian times into quasi-biblical English. Malory I had read in aeroplanes, trains, beaches, and gardens over a period of eighteen months, relishing it from the first page, aided by a now dog-eared printout of Round Table genealogies taken from the internet, which served as a bookmark. *The Pilgrim's Progress,* as a life-long reader of the Authorised Version of the Bible, had never been far from my mind. Gibbon I had been familiar with since university and *Decline and Fall* always brought back memories of the ground-floor room overlooking St Giles that I occupied in Balliol College during my first two years at Oxford University. Scott's *Waverley* is firmly associated with my arrival in Edinburgh in the mid-1970s and coming to terms with living in a different country with its own language, literature, history, and identity.

Each chapter introduces the author of the text, looks at the text's place in the author's overall *oeuvre,* discusses its genre and other distinctive features, examines how it was received over time, explores the reasons for its popularity, and charts its descent from being one of the books that 'everyone' read or at least had heard of to one that, in most cases, has now become the property of the academic specialist. All chapters end with a discussion of why it might still be worth reading this particular text today, the briefest of suggestions for further reading related to this text, and a section on other 'neglected works' that might be worth exploring. The concluding two chapters draw together the reasons for the contemporary marginalisation of these texts, ask whether this matters, reiterate some of their common aspects that make them still worth reading, and look at how different ways of reading these texts might enable readers to get the most out of them.

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1

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO'S ON DUTIES (44 BC)

CICERO'S HANDS

> Here lies Tullius, a name revered throughout the ages.
> Famous for his achievements, and his talent too.
> Criminal weapons killed him cruelly
> Because he was the faithful defender of the fatherland.
> The tyrant gained nothing from the unholy slaughter.
> His genius lives. Only a body died.
>
> – MAXIMINUS, 4th century AD (Cicero, 2012, p. 166)

On Duties (*De Officiis*) was the last of the major writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) and the one that has been read and 'revered' most continuously throughout the two thousand years that have elapsed since his 'unholy slaughter' at the hands of Mark Antony. This epitaph is one of a group, none of whose authors can be securely identified, and probably represents a declamation exercise designed to hone the writer's use of literary Latin. This was one of the main ways in which Cicero's life and writings were transmitted down the generations. There were few students of Latin, from Roman times down to the twentieth century, who did not encounter at least a few passages from Cicero. The one most likely to be studied was *On Duties.* It was a central text of the Western canon.

The last part of Shane Butler's brilliant *The Hand of Cicero,* which examines the relationship between written and oral Roman culture as evidenced in the career and death of Cicero, explains the context in which *On Duties* was written (Butler, 2002, pp. 103–123). Following the assassination of Julius Caesar on 15 March 44 BC (the Ides of March), Cicero, who praised the assassins even though he had not been one of them, increasingly clashed with Mark Antony as the latter came to assume Caesar's autocratic mantle, threatening the survival of the republican regime that Cicero held dear. *On*

Duties was written towards the end of 44 BC alongside some of the damning speeches against Mark Antony – the famous Philippics – in which Cicero tried to stir up his fellow senators to resist the latter's emerging tyranny. The Second Philippic, in particular, with its coruscating and highly personal attacks, echoes some of the themes to be found in *On Duties,* not least the legitimacy of tyrannicide. It concludes with Cicero defiantly asserting that he has no fear of Mark Antony's 'blades', should they be turned against him:

> For me, Members of the Senate, death is now something even to be wished for … I make only these two prayers: the first, that when I die, I leave the Roman people free … the second, that each man's fate match his deserts as a patriot. (Cicero, 2009, p. 171)

Within a year, the owner of the hand that wrote these lines faced the reality of this ultimate test of courage. Having failed to detach Octavian, Caesar's great-nephew (and future Emperor Augustus), from Mark Antony, Cicero found himself proscribed, with Octavian's reluctant agreement, and a price put on his head. It seems to have been Mark Antony's intention to eliminate the whole of Cicero's family, as his son, brother, and nephew joined him on the list, along with 2,300 others (Tempest, 2011, p. 206).

Many versions of Cicero's last days and hours survive, from Plutarch, Appian, Cassius Dio, and, as reported by Seneca the Elder, Livy, Asinius Pollio, and others. They contradict each other. Some of the more fanciful ones were probably derived from declamatory exercises given to later generations of students trying to imitate Cicero's own rhetorical style (Keeline, 2018, pp. 102–146). All one can say with certainty is that Cicero was killed by soldiers sent by Mark Antony, that this happened around the 7th of December 43 BC somewhere between the port of Gaeta and Formia (where Cicero had one of his villas to which he retreated when he wanted to write), and that his head and one or both of his hands were cut off and displayed on the Rostra, the platform from which Cicero as an orator had often addressed the people, in the forum in Rome (Wright, 2001, p. 451). More detailed versions of the story differ among themselves and cannot reliably be verified, in some cases, showing signs of being fictional additions thought up by students undergoing rhetorical training and practising their oratory on an event associated with a well-known person (Roller, 1997). Some have one hand being cut off, others have two. Livy, quoted by Seneca, has Cicero ceasing to flee and going back

to meet his death, calmly sticking his neck out of the litter in which he was travelling, meeting the fatal blow with courage; Plutarch has his throat only being cut, his head being chopped off later on Mark Antony's orders.

Some versions of Cicero's murder have ravens, birds of death, swarming around Cicero's villa and pecking at the rigging of the ship in which he had tried to escape. Cassius Dio even gives us the full horror of an aftermath: Fulvia, Mark Antony's wife, whom Cicero had mocked in the Philippics, abusing the decapitated head, spitting at it, and sticking her hairpin through Cicero's tongue (Wright, 2001; Butler, 2002, p. 123; Tempest, 2011, pp. 1–2). All versions, except one, explicitly mention that he behaved with bravery; even Livy, who had criticised his lack of stoicism in everything else, agreed that he faced his death 'in a manner befitting a man'. More charitably, and one would like to imagine accurately (because, in my case, one has learned to admire the guts of a man who could fight his corner with such oratorical brilliance), a recent biographer, Kathryn Tempest, has described his last moments as ones which 'made him at once heroic, brave and exemplary' (Cicero, 2012, p. 162; Tempest, 2011, p. 2). It is a death that has echoed down the centuries. More than sixteen hundred years later, in *Henry VI Part II,* Shakespeare is still keeping alive the memory of this event, a doomed Earl of Suffolk lamenting the fate of 'great men' at the hands of 'vile bezonians (scoundrels)' and comparing his own impending death with the murder of 'sweet Tully' by 'a Roman sworder and banditto slave'.

Shane Butler wonders why, in what is seen as a predominantly oral culture, Mark Anthony should have been so concerned, contrary to normal practice, to humiliate the hands that had written the speeches that denounced him. Why not the tongue that had delivered them? His answer is that, despite appearances, this was also a culture permeated by the written word and that it was the written, as much as spoken, word that Cicero the great orator also made use of. Cicero was careful throughout his career, in order to maximise the impact of his speeches and enhance his reputation, to circulate written versions of speeches, no more powerfully than with the Philippics (Butler, 2002, pp. 1–2). If one reads the Second Philippic – never given as an actual speech but copies of which seem to have been circulating – one begins to understand why Mark Antony had good reason to fear and hate Cicero's use of the written word and thus to display his severed hands.

Ironically, we do not know how frequently Cicero dictated his works to his assistant and freedman Tiro who was expert both in taking dictation and in deciphering his master's handwriting. For much of the time, Cicero's

own hands may have been in less active use. Given the sheer volume of Cicero's writings – 29 volumes of treatises, orations, and letters in the Loeb edition – Tiro must have been kept very busy. Indeed, he appears to have been the first person in Rome to use shorthand, or symbols for at least some parts of speech, and may have been its initiator (Butler, 2002, pp. 90–91). It is appropriate that his important role in Cicero's life and work should have led to posthumous fame as the narrator in Robert Harris's superb trilogy of Ciceronian novels – *Imperium* (2006), *Lustrum* (2009), and *Dictator* (2015) – based closely as it is on the Loeb edition of Cicero's letters and speeches – and as a character in some of Harris's modern detective novels based on his master's legal cases (Fotheringham, 2013; Harris, 2006; 2009; 2015). After Cicero's death, Tiro made available a collected edition of Cicero's writings, which may help to explain why so many more of his works have survived than in the case of many other Latin writers of the late Roman Republic. He also wrote a biography of Cicero that has not survived but that, in a way, Harris has aimed to recreate.

CICERO THE ORATOR AND POLITICIAN

Cicero came to Roman politics as an outsider. He was born in 106 BC in Arpinum, sixty miles from Rome. Although born a Roman citizen, as Arpinum had been granted Roman citizenship over eighty years earlier, he was not part of the political class that had traditionally ruled Rome. He was very conscious that was a 'new man' or *homo novus,* as such people were called, and would have to work much harder if he wished to ascend Rome's notoriously slippery political ladder. It was a feature of Cicero's political career that his many admirers over the next two millennia were not to forget, with Edmund Burke, Irish outsider and ardent Ciceronian, giving the title *novus homo* to himself and greatly enjoying being both praised and lampooned as 'the English Cicero' for his contributions to late eighteenth-century parliamentary debates (Dench, 2013, pp. 125, 130–131; Lock, 2006, pp. 45, 75, 91, 136–137, 145, 560; Vance, 2015, pp. 29–57, 47).

It was through his skills as an orator that Cicero was able to draw attention to himself. He came to be regarded as the greatest Roman orator of his day. We cannot hear his voice or see the oratorical gestures that accompanied his words, but the 58 extant speeches give us a good idea why he received this accolade. Speaking in public where anyone drifting past could tag on to

the back of the crowd, he learned how to sway large audiences. He mostly spoke for the defence – this tended to do more for one's reputation – but, in 70 BC, he agreed to be the prosecutor in a case against the former governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres, which won him much praise, as well as some enemies. His speeches were so devastating that Verres fled the country before the Senate could reach a verdict.

Oratory was much more to Cicero than just a means to advancing his career. He wrote extensively about both rhetoric (the theory of speaking) and oratory (the performance of a speech): in *De inventione* (*On Invention*), a youthful work which continued to be studied as a basis for argumentation until at least the Renaissance 1,500 years later, and in the later works *De Oratore* (*On the Orator*), regarded by some as his greatest work, *Brutus,* and *Orator* (*The Orator*). To be a good orator, one needed much more than the tricks of the trade. These simply led to demagoguery. Good orators needed to understand philosophy, know their history, and be expert in the law (Dugan, 2013; Bell, 2013, p. 174). Above all, they needed to be wise and virtuous men because, to Cicero, oratory was about educating and influencing people for the sake of the preservation and flourishing of the Republic. Cicero had an acute sense of how language could shape people's perceptions and affect their actions, and in Rome, despite the growing importance of the written word, the main way in which one did this was still orally (Vasaly, 2013, pp. 145, 154–156). Particularly important were the *exempla* (narratives which support an argument) that successful orators could weave into their speeches, showing how distinguished Romans in earlier periods had responded to the situations and dilemmas facing them. Cicero's speeches and writings are full of such references and carried the message that, despite the achievements of Greece and its superiority in matters of theory, the accumulated experience of Romans over the centuries was also formidable and a source of patriotic pride (Dench, 2013, p. 135).

Having launched himself into the world of forensic oratory, Cicero moved as quickly as his age would allow – there were age limits on election to the major Roman offices – winning an annual term as quaestor in 75 BC, aedile in 69 BC, and praetor in 66 BC, his status rising with each appointment. His success in these roles, together with his reputation as an orator, the cultivation of useful contacts, and an advantageous marriage, enabled him, now that he was over 40, to bid for and to win – as top of the poll – a consulship in 63 BC. It was a rare achievement for a *homo novus.*

The events of Cicero's consulship left a legacy that helped to shape the rest of his career. Although successfully fighting off a major threat to the Republic from a disappointed candidate for the consulship, Lucius Sergius Catilina, and in doing so being hailed by Cato as *parens patriae* (Father of the Fatherland), his decision, with the support of the Senate, to execute leading conspirators without a trial created some enemies, earned him some critics, and even drove him into exile for a spell. He became a controversial figure and his statesmanship and life, if not his writings, have continued to attract criticism as well as praise ever since.

Cicero lived in highly troubled times: the 'civil' war between Rome and its Italian allies in the 90s BC, in which he had to enlist as a young man; the civil wars between Marius and Sulla in the 80s BC and Sulla's reign of terror following his victory; the war between Pompey and his conservative senatorial supporters and Julius Caesar in the 40s BC; and the war between Caesar's heirs, Mark Anthony and Octavian, and his assassins Brutus and Cassius after the Ides of March in 44 BC. Cicero was clear what kind of outcome he wanted from all these struggles, which was a strong and united Rome and one in which the traditional power of the propertied senatorial upper class, governing in association with, but not dominated by, the people and their tribunes, was upheld. For this reason, he supported Pompey in the war with Caesar and sided with Brutus and Cassius after Caesar's assassination. Caesar's death, he felt, was a blow against tyranny and for the Republic that he loved. Mark Antony, he believed, was yet another would-be tyrant who needed to be dealt with similarly.

Although Cicero was a staunch and idealistic republican, he was also personally ambitious and, unsurprisingly, keen to survive. His indecisions, compromises, and self-promotion have sometimes been seen as incompatible with the high standards he tried to set in his ethical writings. Pushed too far, this ignores the realities of his time and the brutality with which anyone prominent who put a foot wrong was liable to be treated. More interesting in the end to posterity than his political career, with its successes and failures, were his ideas about the state, as expressed in *De Republica* (*The Republic*), in which some key ideas – government accountability, balance of powers, popular sovereignty, the ethical grounding of political life, the importance of stability, tradition and patriotism – come across loud and clear. Depending on the circumstances, these have appealed over the centuries both to ardent republicans such as Italian renaissance humanists and US republicans – like

Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams – and to a conservative monarchist like Burke (Winterer, 2002, p. 25; Grendler, 1989, p. 122; Lock, 2006, p. 397; Vance & Wallace, 2015, p. 9).

CICERO THE LETTER WRITER

One reason we know so much about Cicero and why he emerges as a more real-life figure than many of his other famous contemporaries is because, as well as his speeches and voluminous writings on oratory and philosophy, 900 of the letters he wrote, mostly during the last twenty years of his life, survive (Morello, 2013). They include letters to family and friends, with almost half of them to his lifelong friend Atticus, who for much of the time was living in Greece. It is partly because of these letters that Cicero has sometimes attracted harsher judgements than some of those about whom we know much less. He was not averse to baring his soul, for example, in the letters to Atticus and to his wife Terentia during his miserable period of exile following the suppression of the Catiline conspiracy. He laments his absence from Rome, wishes himself dead, blames himself and others for what has happened to him, and is at times remote from the Stoic ideals of self-discipline, equanimity, and indifference to fate that one finds advocated in some of his writings. To the modern world, more used to seeing in print what lies behind the public façade, this will seem less surprising and in no way undermining of Cicero's ethical principles, which stand or fall on their own merits.

Despite continuing to circulate in later Roman times – the young Marcus Aurelius reports being much moved by one of them – Cicero's letters eventually disappeared from sight in the Middle Ages only to be rediscovered in Italy in the late fourteenth century by Petrarch, a writer who 'loved Cicero more than all other men of the past', so much so that he composed a letter to his hero telling him that he had found them (Highet, 1949, pp. 83–84). Cicero's letters were used extensively as stylistic models for Latin scholars in fifteenth-century Italian schools, with pupils having to translate a vernacular version of a passage from the letters into Latin and then compare their own version with Cicero's original. Copies reached England, were donated to the University of Oxford by Duke Humphrey, son of Henry IV, and translated into English by John Skelton, tutor to the future Henry VIII (a translation that has not survived) (MacCormack, 2013, p. 252; Marsh, 2013, pp. 307–308; Black, 2001, pp. 352–356; Wakelin, 2016, pp. 491–492). Like many people, Skelton

also possessed not just a copy of *De Officiis* but later commentaries on it as well, along with other Ciceronian treatises (Carlson, 2016, p. 555). Skelton was clearly a fan, but whether Ciceronian ideas, as opposed to aspects of Ciceronian Latin, a language which Henry seems to have read and spoken well, got through to his pupil is much less certain. What is more certain is that his daughter, the future Queen Elizabeth I, as a girl read 'almost all Cicero' to her tutor Roger Ascham, following the pedagogical approach he recommended in his book *The Scholemaster* of doing double translations of Cicero (translation of a text into English and then back again into Latin) 'every afternone, for the space of a yeare or two', with the result that she developed a perfect written and oral Latin style. Elizabeth specifically quotes *De Officiis* in a 1548 letter to her half-brother King Edward VI and has it quoted back to her in a letter from her similarly learned cousin King James VI of Scotland in 1587.[10] Towards the end of her reign, probably while on a visit to Oxford University, in which she also gave a Latin oration, she translated into English Cicero's *Pro Marcello,* a speech praising Caesar for his clemency in pardoning his former opponent M. Claudius Marcellus, an action with a strong emotional charge for a ruler faced by similar choices in relation to Mary, Queen of Scots, the Earl of Essex, and others (Ascham, 1863, p. 105; Marcus et al. 2000, p. 327; Mueller & Scodel, 2009, pp. 1–41). Given that Queen Elizabeth I also went on to translate even lengthier texts by the classical writers discussed in the next two chapters, this reference is merely her opening appearance in a history of 'classical reception' in which she plays a minor but fascinating part.

CICERO, THE PHILOSOPHER

Cicero was an intellectual, an avid reader, respectful of learning, interested in ideas, and keen to find space in his life for contemplation. His letters to Atticus make references to the libraries he built up at his various villas. Books, he said, 'delight us at home, are no trouble when we take them abroad, travel with us, come with us into the country' (*delectant domi, non impediunt foris; peregrinatur, rusticantur*). In one letter, he reports with great satisfaction: 'now

[10] King James VI of Scotland, in his letter written in the fateful year in which an endlessly hesitant Elizabeth finally agreed to the execution of James's mother Mary Queen of Scots, draws attention to the distinction between *utile* and *honestum* (moral relativism and moral absolutism); a distinction that was at the heart both of *On Duties* and of the dilemmas faced by both sovereigns in relation to this execution.

that Tyrannio has put my books in their place, it feels as if a mind has been added to my house'. Slaves and freedmen were employed in cataloguing his holdings, and when a work could not be located in one of his own libraries, he consulted those of other well-known Romans of his day (Corbeill, 2013).

It was during those times when Cicero either felt that it was best to keep his head down or the possibility of his influencing the situation looked slender that most of his philosophical and oratorical works were written. The disturbed period of the First Triumvirate of Pompey, Caesar, and Crassus in the mid-50s BC saw the writing of *De Republica* and *De Oratore.* These were followed in the mid-40s BC, as Caesar's dictatorship hardened, by an impressive collection of works on ethics (*De Finibus* or *On Ends*), the physical order of the universe and the divine (*De Natura Deorum* or *On the Nature of the Gods* and *De Divinatione* or *On Divination*), and human psychology and emotions (*Tusculanae Disputationes* or *Tusculan Disputations*). The final burst of writing came during the disturbed period after Caesar's death in 44 BC and included, as well as *On Duties* (*De Officiis*), a treatise on friendship, *De Amicitia* (*On Friendship*), addressed to Atticus.

Cicero was not a systematic philosopher and, because he wrote so much and wrote so quickly, it is sometimes not difficult to pick holes in his arguments. His view of philosophy was that its purpose was to persuade or instruct. Cicero's concern was not just to enhance our theoretical understanding of things but to educate people with a view to showing them the way to wisdom and thus changing how they live. Although he wrote about all of the Greeks' three branches of philosophy – logic, physics and ethics – his main concern was with the latter. It was developing a 'philosophy of life' and providing reasoned guidance for living that mattered most. He greatly admired Plato and Aristotle and had a general reverence for Greeks as theoreticians, but he felt that the study of ethics would be enhanced by drawing on the practical experience and wisdom – the *mores maiorum* or ancestral customs – of the Romans.

Cicero saw his role as transmitting the best of Greek thought, achieving a synthesis of the complementary Greek and Latin traditions, and providing a Latin vocabulary in which philosophical matters could be discussed. In doing this, he saw himself as being of service to the Roman state, arguing that, though the active life is often seen as being preferable, those forced to withdraw from that life but who carry on working with their minds and through their writings can nonetheless be worthy of their country's esteem (Cicero, 2017, p. 10; Schofield, 2013, pp. 74–75, 78, 83; Corbeill, 2013, pp. 11, 20).

As he wrote in *Tusculanae Disputationes* (*Tusculan Disputations*) with not uncharacteristic immodesty:

> Philosophy has lain neglected to our own day and has been denied any illumination in Latin literature. It is for me to cast this light and to raise it up, so that any service I may have rendered my countrymen in my active life I may also extend to them, if I can, now that I am at leisure. (Cicero, 2017, p. 10)

THE MESSAGE OF ON DUTIES

Most of Cicero's treatises consisted of dialogues in which one speaker puts forward an argument and the other responds with a counter-argument. It is an approach consonant with the mild scepticism of the Academic school of philosophy to which Cicero affirmed attachment. *On Duties* is an exception, taking the form of a letter to his son Marcus, who was at that time absent in Greece studying philosophy (as Cicero himself, like many young Romans, had done as a young man). He had planned to visit Marcus, fearing perhaps that he was falling under bad influences and had got as far as Sicily when, his boat having been turned back because of winds, news from Rome persuaded him that the changed political situation there required his presence. So he wrote to him instead. But *On Duties* should not be seen as a genuine letter. Cicero had already written to his son about his concerns and the 'letter to a son' was a genre that other writers had used when looking for an imaginary addressee. *On Duties* is best seen as addressed to aristocratic young Romans as a group at a time when, with the mounting threats to the Republic, first from Caesar and now from Mark Antony, Cicero wanted more than anything else to rally them to its defence. It is above all a guidebook on how they ought to behave (Kries, 2004, pp. 378–380, and *passim*).

The title *De Officiis* has been variously translated. The first two of the three books follow closely the teachings of the Greek Stoic philosopher Panaetius, whose Greek title is perhaps best translated as 'Concerning the appropriate'. Cicero decided to translate the Greek title as *officium* in Latin, which also conveys the meaning of 'doing our duty', in other words, behaving virtuously and honourably in the ways that the Stoic cardinal virtues *require* us to do. Atticus, Cicero's lifelong adviser, did not like the title, but with neither of them coming up with anything better, Cicero decided to stick with it. In English, it has been translated as both *On Duties* and *On Obligations,* the latter

being used in the latest scholarly edition (P. G. Walsh) on the grounds that it conveys more powerfully the necessary moral connotation than 'duties' might do (Cicero, 2000, p. xvii; Schofield, 2021, pp. 150, 185–186).

Cicero claims to be following Panaetius closely by discussing, in Book I, conduct that is honourable (equated with virtuous), in particular in those seeking to serve the state, and in Book II, conduct that is useful. Book III seeks to discuss situations in which the honourable and the useful come into conflict, something which Panaetius said he would write about later though he never got round to doing so. On one level, the treatise can be read as a discussion between three philosophical schools: the Stoics, who believe uncompromisingly that virtue is the only good, that people should seek what is virtuous in all circumstances, and that the virtuous and the useful can never be in conflict; the Peripatetics, who see virtue as the highest, but not only, good and see problems that cannot easily be resolved in some situations when the virtuous and the useful are pulling in different directions; and the Academics, to whom Cicero elsewhere claimed to belong, who on this point largely agree with the Peripatetics. This is not just some scholarly dispute, as Book III, which illustrates the tension between the virtuous and the useful with specific case studies, makes abundantly clear. It comes into play every time a statesman is torn between doing what he feels is intrinsically right and what he feels will be expedient, useful, and beneficial to large numbers of people but also in some sense wrong. It involves a clash between different conceptions of morality, which is why *On Duties* in its long afterlife continues to be referred to when these matters are under discussion, whether by Machiavelli in his guidance to princes; seventeenth-century writers such as John Donne, Thomas Browne, and Robert Boyle; or Bentham in constructing his very un-Stoic principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' (Colish, pp. 1978, 81–93; Barbour & Preston, 2015, p. 465).

Douglas Kries argues that *On Duties* can be read on two levels. On the surface, it is unashamedly Stoic, Book III concluding with a demonstration that 'the useful is never found in opposition to the honourable' (Cicero, 2000, p. 125). Underneath, however, there is a simultaneous critique of this position, conveying the message that, in the real world, expediency and virtue are sometimes in conflict and messy compromises have to be made. Kries suggests that the treatise is targeting two audiences: the unsophisticated aristocratic young who, in a period of political crisis, need to be encouraged to be idealistic, subordinate their own interests to the demands of virtue and

of the Republic, and be willing to sacrifice themselves, and the sophisticated, philosophically literate audience able to see that there are fundamental flaws in Stoicism and accept that sometimes the virtuous and expedient helpfully overlap and sometimes they do not.

On Duties continued to attract both types of audience during the many subsequent centuries in which it continued to be read, though with varying degrees of sophistication on both sides. The uncompromising Stoic message about civic virtue proved appealing to many Christian writers, as well as to Renaissance humanists, while Machiavelli, one of their number, mulling over his similarly disturbed times and his copy of *On Duties,* felt equally drawn by the strong strain of realism in the treatise (Kries, 2004, pp. 391–392; Colish, 1978, p. 90).

If Kries's interpretation is correct, it makes *On Duties* a subtler book than it has sometimes been regarded in recent times and one in which, as a recent translator of *On Duties* has suggested, Cicero creates a dialogue between author and reader, encouraging readers to find answers for themselves (Cicero, 2016, p. 185). Andrew Dyck, author of the definitive 706-page commentary on the text (Dyck, 1996, as cited in Kries, 2004), had rather dismissed the work as showing us 'less of Cicero the philosopher than Cicero the father and politician' and pursuing its enquiries only 'in the amateur way he (Cicero) considered suitable to a Roman gentleman and statesman'. This is a view that Kries contests, seeing it both as wrong with regard to Cicero's intention – which was clearly, he argues, to produce a philosophical work as well as a guide – and as a misestimate of the book's 'timeless significance and (the) enduring benefits to be gained from its study' (Kries, 2004, p. 377). Others such as Carlos Lévy have similarly commented on Dyck's penchant for finding fault in the book, seeing everywhere 'contradiction, incoherence and confusion' and for describing 'the treatise that Cicero ought to have written but unfortunately did not write', a treatise that would probably end up as 'an impersonal work without any power to stimulate reflection' (Lévy, 2001, pp. 504–506).

Judgement as to the book's continuing power to stimulate reflection must ultimately rest with the modern general reader not with members of the scholarly commentariat, invaluable though the latter's contribution to our understanding of Cicero has been in recent decades, and extraordinarily literate and Foucault-free though their contribution has been by comparison with the scholarly communities that hover around writers such as Bunyan and Scott.

Here are some passages from Book I, which I have read during some of the political changes that have taken place in the UK over the last decade and which I found occasioned reflection on the events of that period.

> Moreover, even in times of greatest success we must exploit the advice of friends to the full, and lend even greater weight than previously to their authority, and under these same favourable circumstances we must beware of lending an ear to sycophants, and of exposing ourselves to flattery, for it is easy to be deceived in that way once we believe that our standing merits such praise. This fallibility gives rise to constant lapses when individuals become puffed up because of what people tell them, and as they commit the most grievous errors, become a contemptible laughing stock. (Cicero, 2000, p. 32)
>
> When we consider the sense of community in itself, there are different levels of obligation, but it can be readily realised which of these takes precedence over others. The first duty is owed to the immortal gods, the second to our country, the third to our parents, and others to the rest on a descending scale. (p. 54)
>
> Our lives, however, are spent not with men who are perfect and manifestly wise, but with people who at best embody some pale reflection of virtue. (p. 18)

Having identified, following Panaetius, the four cardinal virtues as wisdom/prudence, justice, magnanimity/courage, and the fitting, and then discussed the first three, Cicero turns to the interesting idea – as much aesthetic as moral – of 'the fitting'. He sees it less as a separate virtue than as something associated with all the cardinal virtues and with the concept of 'the honourable'. In a world in which, for some people, 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' seem to have replaced 'right' and 'wrong', a treatise on ethics containing great clarity about right and wrong but also encouraging people to think about what is fitting retains as much pertinence as it did in earlier centuries when used to shape guides to gentlemanly conduct, as the two further extracts suggest.

> Nature has endowed us with the role of steadfastness, restraint, self-control, and modesty. And since nature also teaches us not to ignore our relations with other people, it becomes clear how widely relevant the fitting is both to the honourable in general and to its presence in each individual category of virtue. Just as physical beauty attracts the eye because of the apt harmony of the bodily parts, and our pleasure lies in the fact that all those

> parts are as one in sharing a native grace, so this notion of the fitting, which gleams so brightly in our lives, wins the applause of our contemporaries through the regularity, consistency, and control reflected in every word and action. (Cicero, 2000, p. 34)
>
> We must devote … care to our dress; as in most things, the ideal here is the golden mean. We must be careful also not to saunter along too mincingly, looking like tray-bearers in public processions, nor again to hurry along at breakneck speed so that we puff and blow, go red in the face, wear agonised expressions – all indicating clearly that we lack fixed purpose. But we must work even harder than this to make sure that our mental processes do not forsake nature's path. We shall achieve this if we are careful not to fall into fits of agitation and panic, and if we concentrate on what is fitting. These mental processes are of two kinds, thought and impulse. Thought is concerned chiefly with investigating the truth, whereas impulse provokes us to action. So we must ensure that we direct our thoughts to the best possible ends, and subject our impulses to reason. (pp. 44–45)

On Duties offers a wide exploration of qualities and virtues to be expected of those who aspire to be virtuous and honourable and of the way in which these can frequently pull individuals in different directions. All of the following are discussed in the context of Rome in the first century BC but continue to resonate with implications for our contemporary world, the more powerfully given how rarely these days some are ever mentioned: *decorum* (a Latin word we still use), *gravitas* (gravity, dignity, composure), *constantia* (constancy, steadfastness, reliability), *fides* (trustworthiness), *integritas* (integrity), *aequitas* (fairness), *liberalitas* (generosity), *magnitudo animi* (greatness of spirit), *auctoritas* (authority), *temperantia* (restraint), *verecundia* (considerateness), *dignitas* (standing), *consilium* (advice) and *sapientia* (wisdom). As a stimulus to thinking about how these qualities and virtues might apply today, in both public and private spheres, *On Duties* is second to none (Schofield, 2021, pp. 148–151, 156–158, 166–167, 170–176).

THE CASE OF REGULUS

In Book III, Cicero illustrates with *exempla* drawn from Roman history what he has had to say about the honourable and its component virtues and, in particular, about the tension between the expedient and the virtuous. One

of the most interesting is the case of Regulus, consul during the Carthaginian wars, ambushed and captured by the enemy and then dispatched to the Roman Senate, having sworn an oath that if certain leading Carthaginian prisoners in Roman hands were not returned home he himself would return to Carthage. It would clearly be in Regulus's interests, Cicero argues, to go back on his promise, retain his consular status, and stay in Rome with his wife and son: 'Who is there to deny that this was the useful course? Could you name anyone (who would disagree)?' he says. And yet this is not what Regulus did. Having explained the situation to the Senate, he excused himself from voting on the grounds that, while bound by oath to the enemy, he was not a senator. He then went further and, knowing that the senators were inclined to return the Carthaginian prisoners, argued against them doing so on the grounds that 'whereas they were young and the stuff of good leaders, he himself was now spent with age'. The Senate took his advice, retained the prisoners in Rome, and allowed Regulus to return to Carthage 'well aware that he was setting out to confront the most cruel of foes and their refined torture', convinced that 'he must be true to his oath' and that being 'slowly killed (through deliberate deprivation of sleep), he was better off than if he had remained at home as an aged prisoner of war, a consular (ex-consul) who had forsworn his oath' (Cicero, 2000, p. 118).

Cicero's discussion of the pros and cons of Regulus's action focuses on the nature of oaths and on the weight one places on one's own interests and those of the state. Not all oaths need to be kept, as in the case of a promise to pay a ransom for one's life to pirates, extorted under duress and made with no intention of honouring it; yet an oath given to an enemy with sincere intent in the context of an armed struggle formally entered into and covered by agreed rules of war was a different matter. In this case, the breach of such an oath would be both not useful – in terms of Rome's reputation and future relations with other states – and not honourable, thus validating Cicero's and the Stoics' point that what is honourable is always what is useful. Having come to this conclusion, Cicero then rather undermines it by making clear that, in 256 BC, Regulus 'could not have acted otherwise … for it was the will of our ancestors that nothing should make a pledge more closely binding than swearing an oath'. Contemporary Romans, two hundred years later, by contrast, found Regulus's decision to return to Carthage to certain torture and death 'remarkable', leaving us with the implication that, 'outstanding' and 'praiseworthy' though Regulus's actions might be, other ethically acceptable responses to the situation should not necessarily be ruled out (Cicero, 2000, p. 122). It

is an implication reinforcing the view of *On Duties* as a work that sends out different signals and that, far from signalling some kind of moral absolutism, except at the level of the most basic principles, encourages us to reflect on moral dilemmas within their particular contexts (Langlands, 2011). This is one reason it has proved such fertile ground for different kinds of 'reception' during succeeding centuries.

THE TRANSMISSION OF ON DUTIES: ANTIQUITY AND MIDDLE AGES

Knowledge of Cicero and the reading of his *oeuvre* have never died out, though people in different periods have had greater or lesser access to different parts of it and have shown varying degrees of interest in its different aspects. His reputation has generally been high, at least with regard to some of his writings, though the extent to which his personal qualities and political career have been positively or negatively regarded has varied greatly. As with other writers in this volume, Cicero's 'reception' at different times has depended as much on what his readers have been looking for as on what is to be found in his writings. The attitude of later generations towards him often tells us as much about them as it does about him.

In Roman times, Cicero's writings quickly came to be seen as authoritative texts on rhetoric and oratory, and his Latin style the model of elegance, even though, in imperial Rome, assessments of his political role were often, not surprisingly, guarded or critical. This did not prevent the Elder Pliny from delivering an encomium of Cicero and recommending not just that *On Duties* should be read daily but that it should be committed to memory. At the end of the first century AD, Quintilian's *Instituto Oratoria* (*Institutes of Oratory*) used Cicero as a basis for an educational programme designed to produce a Latin-speaking educated ruling class. It is a programme whose use can be traced throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages up to and including the Renaissance. I have already mentioned Emperor Marcus Aurelius reading one of Cicero's letters. His early third-century successor Severus Alexander saw Cicero's life as exemplary, is known to have read *On Duties,* and kept a portrait of Cicero in his family shrine (Gowing, 2013; MacCormack, 2013, p. 266; Cicero, 2000, p. xxxiv).

Cicero's influence changed but did not diminish with the coming of Christianity. Alongside his continuing use in grammatical and rhetorical training,

there was a new interest in how Cicero's ethical writings might reinforce Christian teaching. Major Christian writers such as Lactantius in the third century and Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries drew extensively on Cicero. Lactantius, adviser to the first Christian Roman emperor, relocated Cicero's ideals for Rome to the new Christian Rome, citing *On Duties* no fewer than forty-two times in his *Divine Institutes*; Jerome revered him as *noster Tullius* (our Tully); Augustine read and re-read him, including specifically *On Duties,* throughout his life; Ambrose used *On Duties* as the basis for a major work, *De Officiis Ministrorum* (*On the Duties of the Clergy*), synthesising Christian morality and Stoicism (MacCormack, 2013, pp. 259, 266–268, 271–272, 276; Cicero, 2000, p. xxxv; Coyle, 1955).

During the first few centuries after it was written, in the later years of the Roman Empire, *On Duties* will have been read on papyrus scrolls; these consisted of usually around twenty sheets of papyrus glued together, were difficult to handle, and were easily damaged. It was difficult to glance both backwards and forwards if one wanted to remind oneself of parts one had already read or check the statements one was reading with other parts of the text. Words were not separated, which forced people to read the text aloud in order to make sense of it. In the fourth century AD, papyrus was being increasingly replaced by parchment, often made out of calfskin, and rolls were giving way to codices, single sheets attached together as in a modern book. This made access to all the parts of the text much easier and provided readers with four margins on each page on which they could now put annotations. Until the ninth century, however, the words in these manuscripts were also run together, making it again essential either to read the text aloud or at the very least to mouth it (Fischer, 2003, pp. 84, 86, 91; Furedi, 2015, pp. 36–37).

With the fall of Rome in the fifth century, interest in Cicero's political ideas diminished, but his reputation as orator, philosopher, and guide to ethical living lived on and *On Duties,* among others, continued to be read. He can be found as a huge influence on Boethius's early sixth-century *The Consolation of Philosophy,* a work that, as a later chapter shows, remained profoundly influential throughout Christian Europe over the next thousand years, thus contributing to the pervasive indirect spread of Ciceronian ideas and attitudes (MacCormack, 2013, pp. 290–294). In the late sixth century and early seventh century, Cicero is at the centre of efforts by Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville to bring together knowledge drawn from the Christian and Roman worlds. Even in the remote former Roman province of Britain, copies of Cicero can be found in Anglo-Saxon times, most notably

in Alcuin's great eighth-century library at York Minster. Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury, quotes him three times in his writings and the Venerable Bede is known to have copied excerpts from his work (MacCormack, 2013, pp. 294–299; Copeland, 2016b, p. 60; Willoughby, 2016, p. 98; Cicero, 2000, p. xxxvii; Highet, 1949, p. 37).

Although knowledge of Cicero never died out, references between the fifth and ninth centuries are much rarer. This was a period in which Roman educational practices became less common, the commercial book trade collapsed, and Latin society underwent radical change. A revival of interest came with the Carolingian Renaissance of the early ninth century, with its emphasis on the importance of education and high standards in the transmission of texts. The ninth and tenth centuries were also the time when reading became easier, with gaps now inserted between words, Latin word order made more regular, punctuation marks used, and the introduction of the more readable Carolingian minuscule script (Fischer, 2003, pp. 146, 160–162; Furedi, 2015, p. 44). Despite a pervasive Christian distaste for the pagan world, Cicero's ethical writings were henceforth widely circulated among medieval churchmen, with *On Duties* becoming his best-known work. Copies would have been largely communal rather than personal, given the time and cost involved in their production. They would also have mostly been read aloud by one person to a group; however, word separation meant that, when individual reading was possible, it was now much easier – for the first time in history – for people to read silently, with all the implications for a work's individual reception that this implied (Fischer, 2003, p. 91). Manuals for priests to aid them with confession drew directly on *On Duties,* as did sermons, many of which have been found to contain Ciceronian quotations (Briggs, 2016, pp. 299–301, 306). Meanwhile, Cicero remained the basis of much grammatical and rhetorical training.

Although whole copies of individual works were sometimes available, much of the transmission of Cicero seems to have taken place via *florilegia,* which Highet describes as a 'Reader's Digest type of collection' of writings from different classical authors, and through Priscian's sixth-century grammar, the standard Latin textbook in use throughout the Middle Ages. Cicero is well-represented in surviving thirteenth-century *florilegia* in England, and copies of *On Duties* have been traced to some medieval cathedral libraries. John of Salisbury, one of England's greatest medieval scholars and authors, wrote about obligations in the twelfth century under the influence of *On Duties,* as did the poet John Gower, author of *Confessio amantis,* in his fourteenth-

century French verse guide to noble conduct *Mirour de l'homme.* Even the author of the fourteenth-century vernacular poem *Piers Plowman* brags that he can quote pagan authors such as 'Tullius', though without actually doing so (Highet, 1949, p. 569; Willoughby, 2016, pp. 99, 107, 111–112; Hiatt, 2016, p. 213; Denery, 2016, pp. 379–380; Galloway, 2016, pp. 440–441; E. Steiner, 2016, p. 396; Cicero, 2000, p. xxxix).

The proportion of the population literate in Latin will, however, have been very low. Even those who had been taught to read Latin would still have found it a struggle as a foreign language and would have had to surmount texts written in different hands, with variations in letter shape, spelling, and punctuation, as well as large numbers of abbreviations and strokes representing letters omitted for the sake of speed or economy. Reading parchment is also not easy on the eyes, whether by day, except in direct sunlight, or at night by candle, rush, lamp, flammable torch, or hearth light. As for the sizeable proportion of the population that, then as now, would have had sight problems, reading lenses only became available in the thirteenth century. The fact that the sale of these lenses – held together by clips above the bridge of the nose, and without arms – did not take off until the replacement of parchment by paper and the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, when large-scale production brought down their cost, is an indication perhaps of the limited access that people had to manuscript texts during the preceding period (Fischer, 2003, pp. 176, 184).

In continental Europe, the twelfth century saw a further boost to classical studies, with Cicero's ethical writings of growing importance in the curriculum in cathedral schools. Hildebert, Archbishop of Tours, Peter Abelard, William of Conches, and Alan de Lille, among others (including John of Salisbury, who commuted, like many medieval churchmen, between England and France), all draw heavily on Cicero in their writings and on *On Duties* in particular (Cicero, 2000, pp. xxxvii–xl). Most significantly perhaps for the wider spread of Cicero's influence is the use made of *On Duties* in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae,* in which, while always giving Aristotle priority when the two conflict, Cicero's discussions of justice, beneficence, magnanimity, and the relationship between the useful and the honourable are all given close and generally positive attention (Cicero, 2000, p. xliii).

In addition to shaping the thoughts of the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages, *On Duties* also shaped the work of its greatest writer. Dante cites *On Duties* in his prose works and draws on Cicero's discussions about deceit in that book in allocating different categories of the damned to the

three bottommost circles of Hell in the *Divina Commedia.* Cicero is himself placed in Limbo, the first circle of Hell reserved for virtuous non-Christians (*The Inferno of Dante,* 1996, pp. 32–33).

Not everyone exposed to *On Duties* in the Middle Ages necessarily read it, however, with the same attention as John of Salisbury, Aquinas, and Dante. As ever, investigating 'reception' data for numbers of copies and references in other writings only gets you so far. Many in the Middle Ages will not have encountered the whole of *On Duties* and, even when they did, may have been encouraged to study it not for its content but for its Latinity so that they might improve their own Latin style. Robert Black's exhaustive study into school-level education in Italy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, based on an analysis of the 'glossed' manuscripts and books that have survived in archives (i.e. those with marginal or interlinear annotations), indicates that the purpose of reading many of these Latin texts was overwhelmingly philological rather than moral. Latin authors were read so that, in a world in which Latin was both widely written and spoken among educated and upper-class people, one could read, write, and speak it with fluency and elegance, not primarily for what these authors had to say. Black also found that, though the appearance of universities in the thirteenth century made classical culture more widely available at that level, their impact on schools, over the next couple of centuries, was to discourage the reading of Cicero's ethical works in schools. In Italy at least, *On Duties* faded from young people's school education for a time, only to re-emerge with humanism and the Renaissance (Black, 2001, pp. 6, 8–9, 23, 197).

THE TRANSMISSION OF ON DUTIES: FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

As P. G. Walsh, English translator of *De Officiis,* has put it, 'With the birth of the Italian Renaissance in the fourteenth century, Cicero's influence enters into its most glorious era, and the *De Officiis* is his most widely read book' (Cicero, 2000, p. xlii). Among fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century humanists, Classical Rome appealed to those who, in the words of a later reader of Cicero and of *On Duties* (Alexander Pope), felt that 'the proper study of mankind is man' (Erskine-Hill, 2011). They were attracted by Cicero's scepticism, his this-worldly view of ethical behaviour, his picture of a cultured man, his reservations about the supernatural, and, to those beginning to

question traditional views on authority, his emphasis on republican liberty. His recently discovered letters were widely read and increasingly used in grammar classrooms as models of Latin writing alongside *On Duties* and some of his other ethical writings. As already mentioned, the presence of *On Duties* in classrooms did not necessarily mean a high level of ethical education. There was a widespread belief that Latin was an ethical language and that merely being trained to write it with fluency and elegance developed one morally, a belief that ironically ensured that any genuine moral education was liable to be neglected (Black, 2001, pp. 23–24, 26, 262).

The transmission of Cicero was greatly helped by the introduction of printing. *On Duties* was the first text to be printed in Mainz in 1465 and among the first books printed in Italy in the same year. In France, the first book printed in 1470, a guide to writing, included letters by Cicero. Three hundred incunabula (early printed books from the fifteenth century) of Cicero's works are extant, including sixty-four editions of *On Duties* (Cicero, 2000, p. xliv; Marsh, 2013, pp. 307–309). Early print runs, while allowing distribution vastly in excess of manuscripts, were usually fewer than two hundred and fifty copies and rarely as great as one thousand (Manguel, 1996, p. 134). The introduction of printing, together with the growing use of the vernacular, also stimulated the publication of editions in different European languages. Versions in English (1540 and 1553), French, Spanish, Italian, and German all appeared between 1481 and 1561, together with a number of learned commentaries on the book (Marsh, 2013, p. 312; Highet, 1949, pp. 119–120).

In northern Europe, the greatest Renaissance advocate for *On Duties* was Erasmus, who published his own edition of the work with a commentary in Paris in 1501, a work which went through many reprints. In another of his works, Erasmus has one of his characters remark: 'Speaking frankly among friends, I cannot read Cicero's … *On Duties* … without sometimes kissing the book and blessing his pure heart'. Erasmus's enthusiasm for Cicero, however, did not extend to the slavish adherence to his Latin style of some of his contemporaries and which he mocked in his *Ciceronianus.* Another editor of *On Duties* was Philip Melanchthon, the German Lutheran reformer, who introduced the book into the curriculum plans for schools that he developed and into the university where he taught (Cicero, 2000, p. xliv; Grendler, 1989, p. 124).

In England, in the second half of the fifteenth century, Ciceronian ideas had already spread widely, with numerous printed copies of *On Duties* becoming available from the 1460s onwards. Cicero's ideas about political

responsibilities particularly interested Bishop John Russell, whose sermons at the opening of parliaments in the reigns of Edward V and Richard III owe much to *On Duties*. Russell's two copies of the book, heavily glossed in English, still survive (Wakelin, 2016, pp. 503–505). While in England, Erasmus reinforced this interest, passing on his enthusiasm for Cicero to his English friends and helping to promote the use of his works in Cambridge, where he was Professor of Divinity between 1510 and 1515. At the University of Oxford, *On Duties,* together with Cicero's speeches and rhetorical works, was taught from 1517 onwards at Corpus Christi College. In other ways, these two universities had changed little since medieval times, with classical studies being seen largely as an advanced course of instruction in Latin *en route* to the second part of the degree course in which divinity, law, and medicine (only one could be selected) were taught through the medium of that language (Clarke, 1959, pp. 4, 21–22, 28).

The appearance of printing and the arrival of humanist influences from abroad both coincided with and helped to stimulate the establishment of grammar schools in many different parts of England in the course of the sixteenth century. This also happened as a result of greater prosperity, a rapidly expanding population, the growth of towns, and an increase in the wealth and numbers of the landed gentry. In terms of curriculum, these grammar schools were essentially a continuation of the ancient schools of grammar and rhetoric inherited from Roman times, continued in different clerical contexts throughout the Middle Ages, and now increasingly opened up to a wider lay audience. Their main, and often sole, purpose was the teaching of Latin, increasingly through the use of classical texts rather than the medieval Latin ones previously used. Erasmus's advice as to how these texts might be used, with pen in hand, appears to have been widely adopted, with boys being encouraged to use marginal marks to indicate distinctive features of style, the meaning of new and difficult words, and adages to be remembered. Some of these copies survive, with marginal annotations in different hands, as books passed from one pupil to another (Orgel, 2015, p. 26).

By the end of the sixteenth century, Greek had also been added in many schools. Cicero, alongside Virgil, figured prominently in grammar school curricula, especially from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, a number of his works being used, with *On Duties* being one of the most common. Elizabeth I's tutor Roger Ascham, for whom Cicero was 'the Prince of Eloquence' and the Latin author 'whom above all other I like and love best', recommended in his teaching manual *The Scholemaster* the regular reading of Cicero for all scholars

(Ascham, 1863, pp. 184, 197). The extent to which these works were studied for content as well as language remains uncertain, though the linguistic purposes of the grammar school curriculum undoubtedly predominated, as shown by the huge amount of time normally devoted to composition in Latin (and Greek) verse (Clarke, 1959, pp. 6, 12, 20, 34; Carley & Juhász-Ormsby, 2016). It was also common in early modern Europe for people to cut up texts and insert extracts that particularly interested them or had advice as to how to live one's life into commonplace books. Seventeenth-century religious writers such as the cleric Jeremy Taylor continued to find some of the messages in *On Duties* highly supportive of the Christian emphases on character and duty that they were keen to convey (Taylor, 1989, p. 72). Many people's exposure to *On Duties* may therefore have been to particular sections or even just to isolated quotations rather than to the whole text, what one contemporary academic in the arcane language of his tribe has called 'a potentially quotidian mode of textual consumption' (Smyth, 2018, p. 24).

School and university curricula in England saw few radical changes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a continuing focus on the technicalities of language in schools, for which Cicero remained essential, and on rhetoric, logic, and moral philosophy in universities. The eighteenth century, however, marked a turning point as the century in which Latin ceased to be a living language. By the end of the seventeenth century, Latin texts had disappeared from most publishers' lists except for scholarly and theological publications (Fischer, 2003, p. 240). Speaking Latin at meals had also died out at Oxford. By the end of the eighteenth century, it was rarely used any more for writing books except when these were on classical subjects. University lectures and examinations, which at the beginning of the eighteenth century had generally been in Latin, by the end of the century were now in English. The effect of this on schools was to downplay the importance both of speaking Latin and of writing Latin letters. Samuel Johnson still spoke it as fluently as he wrote it, but this was increasingly an exception even among scholars.

The educational benefit of this development was that the study of Latin in schools became more literary, though the focus on verse rather than prose remained. Within the Latin prose that was studied, *On Duties* continued to be used, even if at one point at Eton it was downgraded to 'private reading'. Gilbert Burnet, historian and Bishop of Salisbury in the early eighteenth century, was still continuing to urge clergy to read 'Tully's Offices' as a work that would 'give the Mind a noble Sett' (Clarke, 1959, pp. 46–48, 51, 61, 66–67, 71, 169). In England's North American colonies, where the Renaissance

ideals of classical learning had found fertile ground, Cicero continued to be idolised as orator and ideal citizen. Throughout the eighteenth century, American university admissions requirements included the ability to read Cicero and, once there, yet more Ciceronian study would follow (Winterer, 2002, pp. 11–12, 25, 138).

Although the place of Latin declined in the eighteenth century, interest in antiquity, and in Cicero, did not. It was during the Enlightenment, it has been suggested, that *On Duties* 'gained still higher acclaim' and that 'no philosophical work from the classical world had a greater impact on eighteenth-century thought'. Montesquieu, Frederick the Great, and Voltaire all gave it the highest praise, David Hume and Adam Smith draw on it when discussing ethical issues, and Kant, though critical of Stoicism, could not escape its influence entirely. Given the absence of any coherent philosophical system in Cicero, the impact, though considerable, was diffuse (Cicero, 2000, pp. xlv–xlvi; Fox, 2013, pp. 319–321; Redford, 2012, p. 432).

As an epistolary treatise, *On Duties* was also the model for much of the content and tone of the famous letters of Lord Chesterfield (1694–1773) to his son Philip, and especially for their emphasis on propriety or decorum. Philip, aged seven, was expected not just to absorb and apply Cicero's messages but to read the work in Latin and simultaneously appreciate its syntax. Within the limits of Ciceronian decorum Chesterfield's admiration for his hero knew no bounds, a marble bust of 'Tully' presiding over his Mayfair library and his suburban retreat at Blackheath named 'Tusculum' after the most famous of Cicero's country villas (Redford, 2012, pp. 432–435).

The decline in the daily use of Latin had the advantage of stimulating new and more authoritative translations into the vernacular, thus increasing the potential scope of the influence of classical authors. One of the most ambitious of the translations of *De Officiis* was the German one of Christian Garve from Breslau, who undertook it at the request of Frederick the Great, whose favourite book it was. Garve came from a modest background and was one of a group of German 'popular philosophers' keen to show the relevance of ethical philosophy to situations in everyday life. The work came out alongside three volumes of Garve's commentary (1,200 pages in total). Although the commentary very much followed Cicero's habit of illustrating ethical issues with *exempla,* in Garve's case taken from everyday life, not just from the actions of famous people in the past, Frederick the Great ungratefully dismissed this popularisation as 'for ignoramuses only'. Given that *On Duties* was 'a classical work that every German student without exception reads

in his youth', as Garve's obituarist reported, it had an audience, despite its size, that was far wider than most philosophical works, going through seven editions during the 35 years after its publication in 1783. Very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment, Garve saw the book as one with a message to the whole of humankind on how to achieve happiness through the pursuit of a virtuous life (van der Zande, 1998).

CICERO TODAY

Having reached a peak in the eighteenth century, Cicero's reputation declined in the nineteenth, even though people neither ceased to read him nor to write about him. The decline was largely the result of the much enhanced interest in the civilisation of fifth- and fourth-century BC Athens that was such a feature of the nineteenth century. This, in its turn, was in some ways a product of Romanticism. Thomas Arnold, as a boy at Winchester, declared himself 'quite tired of the pompous boasts of Cicero' and, as headmaster, at Rugby did all he could to promote Greek studies, as well as to fashion a form of classical education that focused as much on the content of the works as on the language. Even Cicero's reputation as the greatest orator of all time was sometimes challenged in the nineteenth century, his Greek counterpart in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (see the next chapter), Demosthenes, being seen as more natural and more serious. In addition, as the more systematic study of ancient history developed, especially in Germany, Cicero's political career and personal characteristics came under closer scrutiny. The admiration for Julius Caesar, as forerunner of the Roman Empire, shown in some of these new works, did not help the reputation of someone who had welcomed his assassination, though both scholarly and popular defences of Cicero in English – especially Strachan-Davidson's *Cicero and the Fall of the Roman Republic* (1894) and Anthony Trollope's *Life of Cicero* (1880) – continued to give the other side of the picture (Clarke, 1959, p. 79; Cole, 2013; Trollope, 1880).

None of this prevented the continued teaching of Latin authors, including Cicero, in schools. Indeed, M. L. Clarke, a historian of classical education in Britain, has described the nineteenth century as the 'golden age of classical education' as a result of the improvements that took place in how it was conducted; these improvements included a greater focus on content rather than language, as urged by Thomas Arnold, more attention to ancient history, and less time spent on laborious original compositions (Clarke, 1959, p. 84).

The 'golden age', however, was patchy. In grammar schools, pressure from the wider community to focus on more 'useful' subjects had led by the 1860s to less than half of the 700–800 such schools offering no Latin and Greek at all. The Taunton Commission into endowed secondary schools, which reported this finding, observed that in Yorkshire – in which county, this author studied Latin at the second of his two grammar schools, though not at his first – a boy who could read Latin 'with ordinary fluency' was hardly to be met with. The 'public schools' were much better provided for and were increasingly supplemented during the nineteenth century by a new category of 'prep schools' whose standards were sometimes extraordinarily high, with pupils reading Virgil and Cicero fluently long before they moved to 'public school' and then finding that they had to repeat the work all over again (and sometimes to do the same when they moved on to university). Many boys, including many sons of the clergy, often started to learn Latin at the age of five or even earlier, were reading Virgil at eight, and Cicero, Homer, and Livy by eleven or twelve.

At Oxford and Cambridge, which in previous centuries had only offered one degree course, the first part of which was almost wholly focused on the Latin language, the nineteenth century saw the emergence of separate specialist courses, which allowed for a more thorough study of the Classics, embracing the latest literary scholarship and ancient history. Although at Cambridge, Natural Sciences by 1900 had taken over as the most popular course, at Oxford, *Literae Humaniores* (Latin, Greek, logic, philosophy, and ancient history) still dominated. Oxford continued, as in previous centuries, to produce a small elite with a similar educational and cultural background able to understand not just each other's Latin and Greek tags both inside and outside parliament but also to share many of each other's ethical assumptions (Clarke, 1959, pp. 83–85, 98–102, 113–114, 121). Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned Edmund Burke's regular citations of Cicero in parliamentary debates. On one occasion, having used a quotation from Cicero with which to abuse the Prime Minister Lord North, the latter elegantly turned the tables on his opponent by mocking Burke's mispronunciation of one of the Latin words he had used. That was in 1779. It could still have happened, to general amusement, in 1900. It would have been unthinkable fifty years later (Lock, 1999, p. 425).

The decline in familiarity with classical languages and literature that has taken place in the twentieth century is a significant cultural shift, whatever one thinks about its merits and demerits. From having been at the centre of the curriculum for the better part of two millennia, Latin's place in British

schools in the second half of the twentieth century has withered almost to nothing. A 2020 report showed that only 2.7% of lower secondary (11–14) state schools in England offered any kind of tuition in Latin, compared with 49% of independent schools (the latter educating c. 7% of the population) (Collen, 2020). For the tiny proportion of this already small number of pupils who go on to take the GCSE-level Latin examinations at age 16, the literary element in the syllabus has also been reduced to the study of very short extracts from an anthology. The even smaller numbers continuing to Advanced Level at age 18 have been falling throughout recent decades, down to 1,121 entries for the whole country in 2019. Slightly longer literary extracts are required at this level, though in Cicero's case from one of his speeches only.

Even taking into account the various Latin courses still on offer at British universities (where there has been a parallel decline), the number of people in the country currently reading or capable of reading any of the works of Cicero in their original language is likely to be massively below what it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the total population was so much smaller. More importantly, according to David Rieff, this interruption in the collective memory of the ancient world leaves its works 'stripped … of any authority over our moral and political imaginations'. 'As vehicles for our mythmaking about ourselves', he argues, 'they are as good as lost to us' (Rieff, 2016, pp. 19–20).

But are they? As with many of the authors in this volume, the collapse of virtually all knowledge of them among the educated public at large coincides with an explosion of scholarship about them – authoritative annotated editions of their works, monographs, biographies, scholarly articles galore, conferences, learned societies devoted to their transmission. The archival memory of *On Duties* is stronger than it has ever been and, short of nuclear war or civilisational collapse, likely to survive into an indefinite future. Contra Rieff, it is just waiting for the box containing this archival memory to be re-opened so that, once again, its contents and the minds of those opening it may fruitfully interact and, once again, do so in novel ways.

In addition, although current comparative data for other European countries is difficult to get hold of, a survey by the Department of Digital Humanities at the University of Leipzig in 2011–2013 showed how the situation in schools in France, Germany, and Italy was very significantly better than that in England (Franzini, 2014; Tate, 2017, pp. 106–107). It is likely to have remained so, as the current healthy state of ancient language publishing in France, for example, testifies.

WHY READ ON DUTIES TODAY?

The first and main reason for ceasing to neglect 'Tully's Offices' is that it is a work that is still capable, as Gilbert Burnet put it in 1713, to 'give the Mind a noble Sett'. By this, I take him to mean reviewing the use we are making of the finite amount of time we have in this world, reflecting on what is 'fitting' and 'not fitting' in our lives, and thinking through the moral implications of our attitudes, opinions, decisions, and behaviours. In taking a particular ethical stance on issues or situations, how consistent do we think we are? Are the positions we adopt in different parts of our lives coherent in relation to each other? Have we evaluated the consequences of our behaviours and to what extent should these, rather than our sense of the innate rightness or wrongness of actions, affect our decisions? Cicero was very conscious, as a close reading of *On Duties* indicates, of that borderline between moral absolutism and moral relativism on which many of us sit in the modern world.

Second, *On Duties* looks in particular at the clash between virtue and expediency, what one feels one ought to do and what it seems to be in our interest to do. Again, this is a situation in which many of us often find ourselves and, where again, Cicero's arguments and *exempla* can stimulate reflection.

Third, as I hope this chapter has illustrated, Cicero's life, works, and moral philosophy have been a persistent thread in the history of our civilisation for over two thousand years, in most parts of Europe and, from colonial times onwards, in North America. Reading a book that one knows was written in the last years of Republican Rome, was used in schools and universities with virtually no interruption during two millennia, and which shaped medieval Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, helps this reader at least to feel that in doing so he has reinforced his sense of belonging to a particular civilisation, one whose Greco-Roman and Christian heritage continues to explain who he is, why the world he inhabits is as it is, and what its and his values are or should be.

It is a commonplace in the early twenty-first century to talk of the absence of any sense of collective identity among Europeans or even among citizens within particular European states. Jürgen Habermas, the atheist philosopher and Joseph Ratzinger, future Pope Benedict XVI, agreed in their famous 2006 Munich dialogue that modern secular democracies were unlikely to survive unless they had strong ethical 'pre-political foundations', which had sprung up spontaneously from within civil society, and expressed concern about

the current paucity of these (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006). Christopher Caldwell, in a book on the reshaping of Europe as a result of immigration, takes this further, seeing European civilisation as 'insecure, malleable, relativistic', with 'no higher ideal beyond travel, longevity and consumerism', comparing it with Islam, a culture 'anchored, confident, and strengthened by common doctrines'. Where two such cultures come into contact and pull in different directions, he argues, it is the one which is uncertain about what it stands for that is liable to give way (Caldwell, 2009, pp. 285–286).

Unless Europe is felt as some kind of 'spiritual organism', it risks therefore falling apart, as T. S. Eliot argued at the end of the Second World War (Eliot, 1962, pp. 110–124). This is what George Steiner was also asking for sixty years later in his essay *The Idea of Europe,* in which he argues that any sense of European identity will depend on our ability to develop a vision capable of rousing 'the human soul', not on 'central banking and agricultural subsidies … the further extension of the Euro or of parliamentary bureaucracies on the model of Luxembourg'. What was needed, he felt, was an emphasis on the continent's cultural traditions, its diversity, and its tradition of secular humanism, drawing on people such as Montaigne, Erasmus, Voltaire, and Kant (G. Steiner, 2015, pp. 57–66). The extraordinary history of Cicero's *On Duties* and its use down the ages, together with the other stories of books and their legacies in this volume, are thus a small part of a vision of a common European civilisation that can help us to know where we have come from and who we are. In the case of *On Duties,* it may also help us to reaffirm common values highly relevant to that strand of secular humanism central to Steiner's European idea.

Finally, in my case, having never studied Cicero during my years of school Latin (at least to the best of my knowledge) and having never read anything by him until a few years ago, my knowledge of Cicero was largely confined to reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at school, a film version of the play, and a couple of television series set in late Republican Rome. In all of these, Cicero had a minuscule part. In Shakespeare's play, he has so small a part that it is extraordinary that one even remembers afterwards that he was in it. He appears in two short scenes only. In the first, he does not speak and, in the second, speaks only ten insignificant lines. He is referred to four times in his absence: twice about how he looks ('with such ferret and such fiery eyes') and what he says ('he spoke Greek … but for mine own part, it was Greek to me'); once when discussing whether to invite him to join the conspiracy to kill Caesar ('his silver hairs will purchase us a good opinion', but 'name him

not … for he will never follow any thing that other men begin'); and finally to report his death on the orders of Octavian, Anthony, and Lepidus. Insofar as one is left with an impression of him, it is as a difficult, clever, self-important, and well-known figure, broadly reflecting his characterisation in Plutarch, Shakespeare's main source for the play.

A study of twentieth- and twenty-first century films set in late Republican Rome confirms that Cicero is usually only a minor figure there too. Sometimes, he is cut out altogether, though not regrettably, from the 1970 soft porn film *The Notorious Cleopatra* in which his participation is both historically impossible and highly 'unfitting' for an orator who relished nothing more than denouncing his enemies for lechery. Where he is mentioned, it tends to be assumed that the audience will at least have already heard of him (Fotheringham, 2013, pp. 351–352). Cicero's insignificance in these films is in striking contrast not just to his own sense of his role as *parens patriae* but also to his subsequent importance in European history and culture, as I have outlined it. To remedy the ignorance about him that these versions of late Republican Rome do not dispel, one needs therefore to read his works and to do so across the various genres in which he excelled.

FURTHER READING

The most recent annotated English translations of *De Officiis* are those of P. G. Walsh (Cicero, 2000) and B. J. Newton (Cicero, 2016).

There are a number of compilations of Cicero's speeches, letters, and extracts from treatises. *On Living and Dying Well* (Cicero, 2012) includes Book I of *De Officiis,* extracts from *Tusculan Disputations*, and the whole of *On Friendship* (*De Amicitia*). *On Life and Death* (Cicero, 2017) gives one more of the Tusculan Disputations as well as the whole of *On Friendship* and *On Old Age* (*De senectute*). *In Defence of the Republic* includes, among others, the impressive Second Philippic and two of the stirring speeches against Catalina given by Cicero during his consulship (Cicero, 2011). *Selected Letters* (Cicero, 2008) is a good introduction to his voluminous correspondence.

Among the Ciceronian monographs I have read, the most interesting was Shane Butler's *The Hand of Cicero* (Butler, 2002), which, as well as delving into the evidence for Cicero's death and examining the relationship between the written and the oral – the two central Ciceronian dimensions – also brings home to one the insecurity and ever-present threat of violence in

late Republican Rome. One better appreciates the fears, indecisions, aggressions, laments, and frantic self-praise, which surface in Cicero's letters and speeches and for which he has sometimes been criticised rather too hastily by commentators living in far more peaceful times.

Robert Harris's trilogy should also not be missed. I read all three lengthy volumes with huge enjoyment in a few weeks following the writing of this chapter, on trains, planes and, finally, a Cypriot beach. It was good to see *On Duties* mentioned, more than two thousand years after it was written, in a contemporary 'worldwide bestseller' (Harris, 2015, p. 342). Harris was very appropriately elected President of the UK's Classical Association in 2007–2008.

Cicero does not seem to have attracted a great deal of attention from European artists. Vincenzo Foppa's *The Young Cicero Reading*, which Butler illustrates and discusses, and Benjamin West's *Cicero Discovering the Tomb of Archimedes* (which refers to an event during Cicero's quaestorship in Sicily), are worth looking at.

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED BOOKS

Trollope's *Life of Cicero* (Trollope, 1880), one of many biographies of Cicero written during the nineteenth century, must be one of that novelist's most neglected works. Intended for the general reader, it was much criticised, at a time when scholarly opinion had rather turned against Cicero, both for being too glowing an account of his life and for faults of scholarship, but it is neither uncritical nor are its factual faults particularly major ones. Above all, it is an interesting and highly readable example of the way in which one age can fruitfully encounter another without necessarily fully understanding either itself or the other (Rosner, 1988). Insofar as Trollope turns Cicero into 'a model English gentleman', as one critic has suggested, it has the added value of helping the contemporary reader to understand the latter as well (Vance, 2015, p. 47). Electronic and facsimile versions are available online.

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PLUTARCH'S PARALLEL LIVES (EARLY SECOND CENTURY AD)

At the end of his *Life of Plutarch,* which prefaces the five-volume translation (1683–1686) of Plutarch's set of twenty-three paired *Lives* of famous Greek and Roman men of action, which he edited, the poet Dryden places a verse from the sixth-century poet and historian Agathias, written originally in Greek and allegedly an inscription on a statue erected by Romans in Plutarch's memory:

> *Chaeronean Plutarch,* to thy deathless praise,
> Does Martial *Rome* this grateful Statue raise:
> Because both *Greece* and she thy fame have shar'd;
> (Their Heroes written, and their Lives compar'd:)
> But thou thy self cou'dst never write thy own;
> Their Lives have Parallels but thine has none. (Dryden, 1971, p. 288)

These words, though poetically undistinguished, highlight three central features of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*: its locus in the relationship between Greece and Rome; its preoccupation with great men; and its interest in *comparing* people's lives. It also illustrates, albeit in a stylised format, the affection with which Plutarch (c. 45 – c. 120) and his works, but especially the *Lives,* have been regarded over the centuries. Earlier in his *Life of Plutarch,* Dryden sums up what he himself feels are the attractions of the *Lives*: the pleasure it gives the reader and its educative value in matters of morals and politics:

> For my own part, who must confess it to my shame, that I never read any thing but for pleasure, it has alwayes been the most delightful Entertainment of my life. But they who have employ'd the study of it as they ought, for their instruction, for the regulation of their private manners, and the management of publick affairs, must agree with me, that it is the most pleasant School of Wisdom. (Dryden, 1971, p. 270)

Similar expressions about the value of Plutarch's work echo down the ages.

Widely praised both in his own times and during the later centuries of the Roman Empire, Plutarch was to a large extent forgotten for much of the Middle Ages in the former western parts of that empire. In the Empire's Greek-speaking former eastern provinces, Greek copies of some of the *Lives* continued to circulate, especially from the ninth century onwards. In the thirteenth century, a Byzantine monk, Maximus Planudes, gathered copies into a huge codex, which ensured the survival of a larger proportion of his writings than that of almost any other ancient author, declaring, 'I love the man so very much' (Russell, 1972, p. 146). In the fifteenth century, Planudes's fellow Greek, the humanist Theodorus Gaza, a refugee fleeing westwards from the Ottoman conquest of his native Thessalonica, when asked which author he would preserve, should learning altogether be about to disappear and only one could be chosen, named Plutarch on the grounds that 'in saving him, he should secure the best collection of them all' (Dryden, 1971, p. 287).

As Plutarch's memory in the East faded with the collapse of Byzantium, it re-emerged in the West. Read and re-read in Latin and vernacular translations, which appeared from the late fourteenth century onwards, Plutarch had a huge influence on writers such as Rabelais, Montaigne, and Shakespeare, and became standard reading for European elites. The sixteenth-century English monarchs Henry VIII, Mary I, and Elizabeth I were all familiar with his works. Elizabeth translated one of his essays into English, letting it be assumed that she had done so directly and, more impressively, from Plutarch's original 'Grekyshe prose' rather than from Erasmus's Latin version, which scholars have now shown was the one she actually used (Copeland, 2016, pp. 524, 528; Mueller & Scodel, 2009, pp. 273–279).

In the seventeenth century, Ben Jonson testifies to Plutarch's popularity by having a character in one of his plays, *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), name his son 'Plutarchus':

> That year, sir,
> That I begot him, I bought Plutarch's *Lives,*
> And fell so in love with the book, I called my son
> By his name, in hope he should be like him
> And write the lives of our great men. (Russell, 1972, p. 152)

Molière, in his comedy *Les femmes savantes* (1672), includes a character who plans to burn all his books except *un gros Plutarque* – obviously a large folio edition – which he proposes not to read but to use as a heavy weight

for pressing his collars (Molière, 2010, p. 565). The implication here is that a full set of the *Lives* by this time had acquired the kind of status in France that family Bibles were to have in Victorian England (Russell, 1972, p. 146). It is also a nice indication of the rather different attitude to the materiality of texts that prevailed in early modern Europe, with pages of discarded books being used to line pie dishes, as toilet paper, and, most frequently, in the bindings, pasteboards, and endleaves of new books.[11] Twenty years later, Molière's fellow dramatist Racine, who had read the whole of Plutarch at the age of sixteen and drawn on his characters for the tragedies dedicated to his royal patrons, acquired late in life the additional duty of reading passages from the *Lives* to Louis XIV whenever the latter was unable to sleep, the *Life of Alexander* being the King's favourite (Russell, 1972, p. 159; Lathy, 1819, pp. 427–428).

In the eighteenth century, perhaps the period which saw the peak of Plutarch's influence, the *Lives* proved as powerful in undermining monarchs as in supporting them. Rousseau's passion for freedom and his republicanism owe not a little to his reading of Plutarch, which began at the age of six and continued throughout his life, despite his characteristically over-the-top claim in a letter to M. de Malesherbes that by the age of eight he could recite it all by heart (Rousseau, 1959, p. 172). During the French Revolution, reference to Plutarch and other classical authorities added dignity to the cause of the revolutionaries, shaped their sense of what they were reacting against, provided them with arguments to support the changes they wished to introduce, heightened their self-esteem, and gave them the hope that they might emulate the successes of their ancient heroes (Parker, 1965, pp. 89–90, 114–115). All this bore fruit in frequent Plutarchan references in debates and even at times in directly imitative actions. Plutarch was named more times in the debates of the revolutionary assemblies and in major revolutionary newspapers than any other classical author apart from Cicero (Parker, 1965, pp. 17–19).[12] Jacques Pierre Brissot 'burned to resemble Phocion', the most virtuous of Plutarch's Athenian statesmen. His fellow Girondist Jeanne-Marie Roland ('Madame Roland'), when a girl, had smuggled the *Lives* into church in lieu of her prayer book, claimed subsequently to have 'wept

[11] I have not found any real-world example of this happening to the *Parallel Lives,* though a copy of Cicero's *De officiis* has been found in the early seventeenth-century bindings of four different books in Oxford's Bodleian Library (Smyth, 2018, pp. 155–157).

[12] Cicero was named eighty-three times, Plutarch (mainly in reference to the *Lives*) eighty-eight times and Horace thirty-six times.

at not having been a Spartan or a Roman' and, when a victim of the Terror awaiting execution (she was guillotined in 1793), wrote in her prison journal that it was Plutarch who had turned her into a republican. The violently radical Robespierrist Saint-Just constantly referred to the Plutarchan stock of Roman republican heroes. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the continuing impact of a 1,700-year-old text during this period is that Charlotte Corday – one of Plutarch's many enthusiastic female readers – travelled to Paris from Caen clutching a copy of the *Parallel Lives en route* to buying the kitchen knife with which, Brutus-like, she murdered Marat in his bath (Highet, 1949, p. 395; Parker, 1965, pp. 38–42; Russell, 1972, p. 143; Liebert, 2016, p. x; Linton, 2010, p. 25).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Plutarch was also attracting both male and female readers. In colonial South Carolina, in the 1740s, the twenty-year-old Eliza Lucas, running an indigo plantation on behalf of her absentee father, was in the habit of rising at 5 a.m. in order to find time to read Plutarch. Advised by a well-meaning neighbour that if she continued to do so she would spoil her marriage, wrinkle her skin, and go to an early grave, she only just managed to save her copy from being thrown in the fire and then continued to read it to the end before moving on to Virgil (Winterer, 2007, pp. 12, 18–20). Later in the century, Plutarch was as much an inspiration to the leading figures of the American Revolution as he was for French revolutionaries. During the cold winter of 1777–1778, at the Revolutionary Army's headquarters in Valley Forge, Alexander Hamilton read and speculated about the implications of Plutarch's *Lives* of Theseus, Romulus, Numa, and Lycurgus for the new Republic he was helping to found. Plutarch was similarly a favourite of John Adams, the second president of the United States. While ambassador to the Dutch Republic in 1784, he lamented in a letter to his son from The Hague that his 'breakfasts don't relish, for want of a little Plutarch, with my coffee'. The deficiency seems to have been rectified, as two years later, his wife Abigail in Leiden had got hold of a copy, which she was obviously keeping for herself to read, though whether or not with her breakfast is not recorded (Stadter, 2011).

Napoleon was a great fan, as one might expect, re-reading Plutarch's *Lives* throughout his life, with some of their messages, like the advantages of leniency towards defeated enemies, traceable in his actions. As a young man at military college, according to the memoirs of a schoolfellow, he was often seen standing on tabletops acting out scenes from Plutarch with his

friend Fauvelet de Bourrienne. It is no surprise to learn that his favourite hero was Caesar (MacDonald, 2023, p. 402). His great Romantic contemporary Beethoven was similarly well read and, according to one English traveller who met him, preferred Plutarch 'to all the rest'. Having become aware of his deafness, he commented to a correspondent that he had 'often cursed my Creator and my existence' but that '*Plutarch* has shown me the path of resignation'. One biographer claims that in his last illness, from which Beethoven knew he would not recover, Walter Scott was cast aside in favour of Plutarch and other Greek writers, though a close scrutiny of the reference leads one to believe that this is the kind of anecdote that might have appealed to Plutarch himself and that he might have been tempted to use, despite the lack of supporting evidence (Borthwick, 1998).

The list of those for whom Plutarch was a favourite author continues well into the nineteenth century, with Emerson, Carlyle, Nietzsche, Michelet, and others still rating him highly, though for different reasons. Nietzsche, unable to read himself because of his appalling eye pain and headaches, had his friends read Plutarch to him in the summer of 1873 while sprawling on 'velvety moss and larch needles' after swimming in a lake near the Swiss alpine resort of Chur (Prideaux, 2018, p. 118). One can even find the occasional slightly *outré* judgements about Plutarch from distinguished commentators well into the twentieth century, with André Maurois in 1966 ranking him alongside Homer and Montaigne (Konstantinovic, 1989, p. xv). It is also significant that Charlie Chaplin, keen to compensate for his inadequate education, felt that Plutarch should be included among the great works he took with him into his dressing room (Rose, 2001, pp. 378–379). In general, however, by the mid-nineteenth century, Plutarch's reputation had sunk well below its zenith. Although he continued to be read by schoolboys (and some schoolgirls) – there was even a publication called *The Juvenile Plutarch* available both in England and the USA in the early nineteenth century – he was increasingly taken less and less seriously (Winterer, 2007, p. 74). Slowly, after a long run of over 1,700 years, Plutarch began to be absorbed into the list of slumbering, if not quite extinct, literary volcanoes with which this book is concerned.

The rest of this chapter aims to show what it was about Plutarch that for so long attracted so much positive attention, how the nature of this attention changed over time, why neglect finally set in, and what it is that Plutarch still has to offer to the twenty-first century.

PLUTARCH THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

The man who wrote about men who exercised great power and about decisions made in the great centres of power of his world was born in the small city of Chaeronea in Boeotia in central Greece, where he spent most of his life. Plutarch went to Athens as a young man to study philosophy, returning frequently in later years, visited Alexandria, another great centre of the Greek-speaking world, and made at least a couple of visits to Rome, as the capital of the empire of which Greece was now a part. His family was prosperous and he was a leader of his local community, exercising municipal functions of which he was proud. 'I live in a little town', he wrote in his *Life of Demosthenes,* 'where I am willing to continue, lest it should grow less' (Plutarch, 1876, p. 606). He seems to have had a happy domestic circle, to which he was much attached, and a wide group of educated friends, including some imperial administrators, to one of whom, Sosius Senecio, twice consul at Rome, he dedicated the *Parallel Lives.* These contacts enabled him to obtain Roman citizenship for his family. His Latin was not perfect, but he acquired enough to be able to use historical Latin sources and he had a good knowledge of Roman customs (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 1995, p. 57). He wrote in Greek for the class of educated Greek notables to which he belonged and for a Roman official class in which Latin–Greek bilingualism at this time was common.

Plutarch was, first and foremost, a philosopher, strongly Platonist in his view of man and the world, though with influences at times from both Aristotle and the Stoics. His interest was not in developing or refining philosophical theories but in philosophy as 'the Art of Life' and, above all, in practical ethics (Plutarch, 1992, pp. 8–9). This was a central theme that links the two major strands of his works: the *Parallel Lives* (which make up eleven volumes in the bilingual Loeb edition) and the *Moralia* (which make up the remaining sixteen volumes). Although the *Parallel Lives* are what Plutarch is chiefly famous for today, insofar as he is known, it has sometimes been the *Moralia,* a collection of seventy-eight essays, that has attracted as much or, at times, more attention over the centuries. There are even more references to the *Moralia* in the writings of Montaigne, Bacon, and Rousseau, for example, than there are to the *Parallel Lives* (Konstantinovic, 1989, p. 32; Goodenough, 1897; Morel, 1926; Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 1995, pp. 47–48). In addition to the *Moralia* and the *Parallel Lives,* there are also many works listed in a

fourth-century catalogue that have since been lost. Although dating Plutarch's works is problematic, it looks as if most were produced during the latter part of his life following the death in 96 of the Emperor Domitian, for whose memory Plutarch showed 'cordial dislike', and, after which, he may have felt it safer to write (Jones, 1995). If so, his rate of production was phenomenal.

Moralia is a very loose term for Plutarch's other works, which are far more than just essays on ethical issues, embracing politics, science, theology, education, rhetoric, literary criticism, and psychology. They are written in widely varying styles and genres, from reported conversations ('table talk') to literary epistles and from philosophical dialogues to what in the contemporary world might be called a 'learned article' (Plutarch, 1992, p. 4). Titles range from 'On inoffensive self-praise' to 'Whether the universe is one', and from 'Consolatory letter to his wife' to 'How a young man should listen to the poets'. There is also a great deal about Greek history that is largely of antiquarian interest.

PARALLEL LIVES

But it is the *Parallel Lives* that are our main concern. There are twenty-three paired *Lives,* in each case putting together a Greek and a Roman, and two *Lives* of first-century Roman emperors, which were part of an earlier series of *Lives* of emperors that has not survived. Two other *Lives,* one of a king of Persia and one of a Greek poet, are also sometimes included in editions. The paired *Lives* are intended to be read together, in most cases, the members of each pair being compared with each other in all sorts of both direct and indirect ways and concluding with a formal comparison (*synkrisis*). The modern tendency, at least in recent decades in the Penguin editions, to publish groups of the Greek and Roman *Lives* separately under headings, such as *The Rise and Fall of Athens* and *The Fall of the Roman Republic,* thwarts Plutarch's original purpose and is a striking example of how publishing and editorial decisions can radically change the messages a work sends out and thus the nature of its reception. More fundamentally, it suggests a way of reading the *Parallel Lives* that assumes that their main value is as a historical account of the periods in Greek and Roman history on which the *Lives* focus. This was neither Plutarch's intention nor has it ever been what people gained from reading them, even if this is what they thought they had gained. What, in practice, most of them will have gained is a set of images of antiquity, which

they will have been able to integrate in different ways with other parts of their knowledge and understanding, an appreciation of Plutarch's literary merits, and an opportunity to reflect on ethical issues relevant to their own lives.

Plutarch was writing a long time after most of the events he was describing, the last Greek *Life* being that of the general and statesman Philopoemen, who died nearly three hundred years before he was writing, and the last Roman *Life* that of Mark Antony, who died fifteen years before Plutarch was born. He had read widely in the Greek sources available to him, though less so in the Roman ones, and was not wholly unconcerned about issues of veracity. Geert Roskam has suggested that he was driven, above all, by a desire to investigate the lives he had been studying, with a view to evaluating the degree of virtue and vice to be found in them. Roskam calls this Plutarch's 'zetetic moralism' ('zetetic' meaning investigatory), a motivation that left him with no particular reason for distorting the facts (Roskam, 2021, pp. 89–112). Plutarch was not, however, a Rankean historian concerned with searching out every possible scrap of evidence and interrogating it rigorously. That would, anyway, have been difficult to achieve given the sheer volume of his writing programme (a Penguin Classic of nearly four hundred pages includes English versions of only six of the forty-eight *Lives*) and given the circumstances in which ancient historians worked, papyrus rolls being hefty and unmanageable objects, often without indexes and column numbers, requiring two hands to hold them up and making it difficult, even with the help of slaves, to keep more than one, or at the most two, sources before one's eyes as one wrote (Pelling, 2002, pp. 309–310, 314–315).

PLUTARCH THE MORAL EDUCATOR

Even more fundamentally, Plutarch saw the *main* purpose of his *Lives* as to unravel the *character* of his 'heroes' and the impact that this had on their lives so that readers could compare them with each other, evaluate their virtues and vices, and consider the implications of these for their own lives. It was not primarily to recount the history of Greece and Rome.

The idea of a person's *character* was central to Plutarch's writing of the *Lives* and derives, as so much of his thought, from Plato and Aristotle. The soul, in his view, has two elements: the irrational and the rational. The irrational element has two parts: the appetitive or purely instinctual part and the spirited part. The spirited part can be good and necessary, but – since it causes the passions

of anger, shame, and ambition, all of which can be taken to excess and become harmful – needs to be kept in check by the soul's rational element. Virtue, the pursuit of which is the central goal of human life, is to be achieved through the triumph of reason and the attainment of a balance or 'mean' between man's different passions. 'Character', as part of the irrational soul, is one's predisposition to act in particular ways, inclining to either the good or the bad insofar as reason is enabling an individual to achieve this 'mean'. 'Character' is based on the 'nature' that one is born with, and that is unchangeable; yet unlike 'nature', it is affected by the life one leads and by the success or failure of reason to come out on top in the struggle for control of one's soul. This is why education is so important for Plutarch, why he writes about it in the *Moralia,* and why he is usually very interested in how his heroes have been educated in their early years (Duff, 1999, pp. 73–74).

One of the fascinations in reading the *Lives* is to see how Plutarch encourages us to evaluate the importance of factors such as nature, character, education, reason, ambition, anger, shame, lust, and virtue in the lives of each of his pairs of great men and how the two men compare with each other in this respect and also with the other people who form part of their stories. In pairing Alcibiades, the great fifth-century BC Greek statesman, orator, and general, with Coriolanus, the legendary Roman general whose *Life* formed the basis of Shakespeare's play of the same name, Plutarch puts together two people who are naturally highly 'spirited'. They have 'great natures', as Plutarch puts it. But this means that they are capable both of great good and great evil. In the case of Coriolanus, it makes him courageous and excellent in warfare but also angry, prickly about his honour, unwilling to compromise or even ingratiate himself with people he needs to win over, quick to offend others, and thus incapable of injecting calmness and self-restraint into his soul. Plutarch puts this down, in part, to his defective education. Alcibiades, by contrast, though also highly spirited, has a much more flexible character, is charming, articulate, and amenable to change. His big advantage, and the explanation of his greater success, at least in some areas, is that he is far better educated, and educated by Socrates no less and, as a result, more capable of thinking through the implications of what he is doing. However, he is highly susceptible to flatterers, inconsistent, and utterly unpredictable except for his addiction to debaucheries and luxury and his determination always to be first. Both 'heroes', despite some admirable characteristics and important achievements, end up rejected by their respective peoples and ignominiously put to death in exile, while Plutarch leaves his readers particularly unclear

in this case about how to rate two such highly 'individual' characters (Duff, 1999, pp. 205–235).

Although some of the *Lives* seem to have been chosen largely for their potentially deterrent effect – those of Alcibiades and Coriolanus, and Mark Antony and Demetrius are clearly in this category – Plutarch, while never forgetting the core moral purposes of his writing, generally avoids crude and over-simplified moral judgements. His approach to the moral issues in his characters' lives is well described as 'complex, exploratory, and challenging' (Duff, 1999, p. 9). One is encouraged to look out for signs of moral improvement in his characters: a commitment in their lives to the pursuit of *aretê* (moral virtue or excellence) and *eudaemonia* (human flourishing); a willingness to accept correction; a diminution in passion; a growing desire to be controlled by reason; admiration, rather than jealousy, for good men and a willingness to study and follow their examples; scrupulousness over little things (Russell, 1972, pp. 88–89). Alongside this, one is also encouraged to rate a character's political and military success. Marius, the brutal, violent, and autocratic Roman statesman, for example, and the subject of what is possibly the most negative of Plutarch's *Lives,* also achieved many things for his country. Plutarch can also accept that the end may sometimes justify the means. In his *Life* of Cato the Younger, ardent defender of the Roman Republic and, unlike Marius, one of the most praised of Plutarch's great men, Plutarch points to Cato's utter inflexibility, a refusal to compromise that undermines what he is trying to achieve and is responsible for his ultimate failure. The other half of the pair, the Athenian statesman Phocion, by contrast, is commended for his willingness to do a deal with Philip of Macedon at a time when there was no longer hope that any other policy would enable the Greeks to hold on to their independence, as well as for facing down opponents who accused him of treason for doing so.

PLUTARCH'S HUMANITY AND DOUCEUR (SOFTNESS)

Plutarch generally approaches the judging of his characters with mildness and humanity. Dryden summed this up as the 'certain air of goodness which appears through all his writings' (Dryden, 1971, p. 278). Although he makes some severe judgements, there are none of the complete hatchet jobs one can find in Suetonius, Lucian, or Lytton Strachey, even though a modern observer

might well have thought that more of these might have been deserved. Some of Plutarch's Greeks and Romans commit such appalling barbarities that one can long at times for a transfer to the English Middle Ages, where the occasional drawing and quartering of opponents comes over by comparison as the height of restraint.[13] Plutarch's bland summing up of the life of Sulla, following a vivid description of his Stalinesque proscriptions and massacres, leaves one feeling that the ethical spectacles through which he sees the world are more at variance with one's own than one might have imagined.

It is a generosity of judgement that reflects that distinctive Greek *douceur* (softness), which the great French scholar Jacqueline de Romilly wrote about in *La douceur dans la pensée grecque* (de Romilly, 1972). There are a number of reasons for this *douceur*. First, it is probably because Plutarch saw his main purpose as putting before his readers the glorious deeds of humanity so that they might learn from them and apply their lessons to their own lives. Too great a concentration on evil and vice would neither convey the desired moral message nor reflect Plutarch's sense of the worth of his civilisation. As a Greek keen both to convey to Romans the value of Hellenic culture and to reinforce his Greek readers' sense of pride in their own heritage, it was important to offer a positive image of Greece's classical past. Plutarch may also have been influenced by the common assumption in antiquity that the depiction of vice in an author's characters rebounded upon the author himself (Russell, 1972, p. 61; Duff, 1999, pp. 56–60).

FROM THESEUS AND ROMULUS TO MARK ANTONY

Although the *Lives* cover the whole period from the mythical and legendary foundations of Athens, Rome, and Sparta (Theseus and Romulus, Numa and Lycurgus) right up to the death of Mark Antony in 30 BC, they are

[13] Although lacking in Plutarch's 'gentleness' in relation to his characters, Lytton Strachey's preface to his *Eminent Victorians,* published in 1918, contains a rationale for the historian/biographer's art that is closer to Plutarch's than any other I have found: 'It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch (the Victorian period). If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with careful curiosity' (Strachey, 1948, p. 6).

particularly clustered in two periods: the fifth, fourth, and early third centuries BC in Greece and the last hundred years of the Roman Republic preceding the accession of the first emperor, Augustus, in 27 BC. In addition, there is a cluster of Spartan *Lives,* which cohere as a group, beginning with that of Sparta's legendary founder and lawgiver Lycurgus, continuing with the *Lives* of Lysander and Agesilaus, both of whom abused his laws, and ending with those of Agis and Cleomenes, who made failed attempts to restore them (Liebert, 2016, pp. 100–101).

The focus in the Greek *Lives* on a period when Rome had not yet taken over large parts of the Greek world is understandable in a writer proud of his Hellenic heritage, as is the avoidance of more recent 'great men' whose careers remained politically sensitive. The reasons for the choice of certain individual *Lives* within the selected periods are not always clear. In the case of Lucullus, a politician and general in late Republican Rome, his links with Plutarch's hometown and his Hellenic culture seem to have been a factor. The *Life* of Aratus, the third-century BC Greek statesman, was written at the request of one of his descendants. Others seem to have been chosen because there were extant biographies by other Greeks that Plutarch was able to use as a basis for a new *Life.*

PARALLEL LIVES: BIOGRAPHY OR HISTORY?

Plutarch opens his paired *Lives* of Alexander and Julius Caesar – one of the most memorable pairs within the *Parallel Lives* – with the following explanation of the *genre* in which he is writing:

> My subject in this book is the life of Alexander, the king, and of Julius Caesar, the conqueror of Pompey. The careers of these men embrace such a multitude of events that my preamble shall consist of nothing more than this one plea: if I do not record all their most celebrated achievements or describe any of them exhaustively, but merely summarise for the most part what they accomplished, I ask my readers not to regard this as a fault. For I am writing biography, not history, and the truth is that the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues and vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to

> cities. When a portrait painter sets out to create a likeness, he relies above all upon the face and the expression of the eyes and pays less attention to the other parts of the body; in the same way it is my task to dwell upon those actions which illuminate the workings of the soul, and by this means to create a portrait of each man's life. I leave the story of his greatest struggles and achievements to be told by others. (Plutarch, 1973, p. 252)

To some extent, it has been the failure of some modern commentators, the products of the nineteenth-century shift to 'scientific' history, to pay attention to this explanation that has led to the decline in Plutarch's reputation. The value of the *Parallel Lives* lies not so much in the historical accounts they provide but in their literary value, anecdotes, vivid images, and descriptive and narrative power, in their depiction of character, exploration of psychological, moral, and political themes, and in the insight they give us into the mind of Plutarch and of *his* times rather than, necessarily, those of the people about whom he was writing. Plutarch can also be seen to be reacting against the Aristotelian idea that history, as an activity concerned with the specific and contingent, is ranked lower than poetry, which, focused as it is on the eternal, is more philosophical. By using a biographical approach to historical study as a means for exploring general issues of character and morals, Plutarch is raising the status of his art in the eyes of his contemporaries and blurring the boundaries between it and the directly ethical and philosophical part of his *oeuvre* to be found in the *Moralia* (Duff, 1999, p. 29).

The focus, as he suggests above, is often on small and seemingly insignificant incidents, chosen for their exemplary value. He illustrates why Cato the Younger is both a model of virtue and grew up to be an impractical statesman by recounting the following incident from his childhood:

> One of his relations, on his birthday, invited Cato and some other children to supper, and some of the company diverted themselves in a separate part of the house, and were at play, the elder and the younger together, their sport being to act the pleadings before the judges, accusing one another, and carrying away the condemned to prison. Among these a very beautiful young child, being bound and carried by a bigger into prison, cried out to Cato, who seeing what was going on, presently ran to the door, and thrusting away those who stood there as guard, took out the child, and went home in anger, followed by some of his companions. (Plutarch, 1876, p. 544)

Plutarch was far from wholly uncritical of his sources, worrying in particular if an event was only evidenced in a single source, but one cannot expect from him the kind of accuracy and probability checks one would look for in a modern biographer or historian. One must also remember that, like most educated Greeks and Romans of his time, he was thoroughly trained in rhetorical techniques and as much concerned at times to convince and inspire as he was to analyse and report.

But one should not take Plutarch's statement about his purposes in the preamble (above) to his *Lives* of Alexander and Caesar as applying to *all* his *Lives.* These vary hugely in the extent to which they are biographical or historical, even within this particular pair where the *Life* of Caesar veers much more towards a historical account than that of Alexander. The *Lives* of Solon and Lycurgus are similarly as much about the Athenian and Spartan Constitutions, respectively, as they are about the two men. The *Lives* vary considerably in other ways, in terms of their focus on the different elements that make up a biographical or historical account, the extent to which heroes are regarded in light of Greek conceptions of 'tragedy', and also, unsurprisingly, in quality.

PARALLEL LIVES: DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS

The *Parallel Lives* have been interpreted in many different ways, especially in relation to Plutarch's attitudes towards Greece and Rome, his significance as a political writer, and the extent to which he can be seen as a crude or subtle moraliser. Some of this arises from the different ways in which he has been translated and from the different ways in which parts of the same translation have been labelled, annotated, or highlighted by editors and publishers (Guerrier, 2023, pp. 129–131).

There is no doubt about Plutarch's high regard for Greek history and culture and his desire to extol it before the eyes of his Roman, as well as Greek, readers. He shows particular interest in the extent to which his Roman heroes have had a Greek education; where they have, as in the case of Lucullus and the second-century BC Roman general and statesman Aemilius Paulus, he tends to see this as an explanation for their superior characters (Mossman, 1995, pp. 209–228). Despite his admiration for Lycurgus and many things Spartan, Plutarch has to admit that his Roman partner and fellow lawgiver Numa 'was by a great deal the more humane' of the two and – clearly the highest praise

he felt able to give – more 'Greek-like', above all because of his general *douceur* and more humane treatment of slaves in comparison with Lycurgus's extreme harshness towards the Spartan helots (Perrin, 1967, pp. 382–400). Even the appalling Emperor Nero is referred to favourably because of the respect he appeared to show to Greek freedoms (Pelling, 2002, p. 244).

More fundamentally, it is through a distinctively Hellenic lens that Plutarch sees the whole history of Rome, judging Roman heroes from a Platonic and Aristotelian perspective and interpreting Roman politics in terms of the Hellenic experience of democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny and of the noble–demos relationship (Duff, 1999, p. 302; Pelling, 1995, pp. 328, 341). It has been suggested, however, that Plutarch went further than this 'statement of cultural resistance' in actively asserting the superiority of Greece, implying the need for a Greco-Roman partnership in running Rome's enormous empire, and sending out a message of 'Greco-Roman cultural unity' (Duff, 1999, p. 298). Some later readers, harnessing Plutarch to their struggle for a Greek revival, like the early nineteenth-century Greek editor of the *Parallel Lives,* Adamantios Koraes, have even suggested that Plutarch had been wanting to rescue the Greeks from the slavery of Roman rule, in the same way that his contemporaries within the Greek diaspora were keen to liberate them from the yoke of the Ottomans.

As Koraes later came to recognise, however, when criticising the Greek insurrection of the 1820s for its excessive ambition, Plutarch himself had been as careful in this respect as his own Greek heroes such as Phocion whom he had praised for their caution and moderation (Xenophontos, 2004). Plutarch was acutely aware in his own time, as he wrote in a letter to a young Greek friend, of 'Roman boots hovering just above the heads' of Greek officials and how any challenge to Roman rule could easily bring exile or, even worse, 'the dread chastiser, the axe that cleaves the neck'. Greeks therefore would be foolish, he thought, to harbour hopes of restoring the autonomy of their cities or even to speak too freely of the time when they still possessed it (Liebert, 2016, pp. 24–25). What they were able to do, and what Plutarch did in his writings, was quietly to affirm their Hellenism, continue to interpret the world from a Hellenic perspective, and explore the implications of this perspective for their own lives, while doing so within what the Plutarch scholar Tim Duff has described as 'the protected safe space of the distant past' (Duff, 1999, pp. 291, 301–302, 308–309).

If one looks at Plutarch in this way one ceases to see him just as a discerning moraliser and interesting stylist. Instead, one begins to see him again, as Machiavelli, Rousseau, and others have done in the past, as a writer who can

make a distinctive contribution to political thought. As a political writer, his value today is not so much his account of ancient Greek politics – about which he knew a great deal but which he viewed through a lens that from a modern point of view is bound to distort – or of ancient Roman politics about which he understood much less, but as someone intuitive about some of the relatively unchanging aspects of political psychology and, more specifically, as someone with things to say about the nature of identity in complex political situations.

The great nineteenth-century Plutarch scholar and French school inspector Octave Gréard drew attention to Plutarch's attachment to the idea of the city as a political entity and to the importance, in the context of a potentially oppressive imperial authority, of holding on to those residual rights which cities and their citizens within the Empire still possessed (Gréard, 1874, pp. 392–393). The role of the city is also central to the recent writings of the contemporary Plutarch scholar Hugh Liebert. Plutarch was a partly Romanised Greek writing both for other partly Romanised Greeks as well as for partly Hellenised Romans. Out of his writings emerges a sense of how the different elements of these identities might be reconciled, and, in particular, how one might balance one's sense of being citizen of a Greek city like Chaeronea, member of a wider Greek-speaking community with a long history and wide geographical spread around the Mediterranean, and citizen of the Roman Empire.

Liebert sees the *Life* of Alexander as one place where Plutarch explores these issues. Alexander, being a Macedonian, is both Greek but also not really Greek (at least in the eyes of other Greeks). Being allegedly descended from Achilles, he is also a god, a role he sometimes plays with, while at the same time, as the sceptical pupil of Aristotle, knows full well that he is not. Having conquered Persia, he does not attempt to impose his own culture on his new subjects, insisting simply on an acceptance of his authority. He adopts oriental dress himself. Although short-lived, the empire he establishes therefore in some way prefigures that of Rome in being based, at least in part, on a fusion of different cultures. That is why, in our contemporary world, with its semi-federal entities like the European Union, large federal states like the USA and the Russian Federation, and growing sense of a global moral community, the issues raised by a reading of Plutarch in relation to subsidiarity and the multiplicity and indeterminacy of identities have such a pertinence. It is perhaps above all in this sense that Plutarch remains a political thinker with things to say to us as relevant as the somewhat different things that he had to say to Machiavelli in the sixteenth century or to Rousseau in the eighteenth (Liebert, 2011, *passim*; Pelling, 2002, p. 262).

In the third area in which interpretations of the *Parallel Lives* differ – discussions about the subtlety or otherwise of Plutarch as a moralist – the focus is often on his use of the comparisons (the *synkriseis*), which in all but four sets of the paired *Lives* round off the two accounts. Traditionally, these have tended to be dismissed as stylised rhetorical 'school exercises' of little interest and in which Plutarch 'make(s) desperate efforts to discover or invent points of contact between his two subjects' (Russell, 1972, p. 109; Plutarch, 1968, p. xii). In separate editions of Greek and Roman *Lives,* they are quite often omitted altogether. More recently, there have been attempts to rehabilitate them and to argue that, far from being crude and over-simplified summary reports, they reflect the subtlety and complexity of Plutarch's moral stance. The formal comparisons between the two members of the pair also need to be seen alongside the comparisons with minor characters that are sometimes included within an individual *Life* or even, as in the case of the *Life* of Marius where the *synkrisis* is missing, with characters within the *Life* of his pair Pyrrhus. What is striking about some of these *synkriseis* is the way they contradict judgements within the *Lives* themselves and are often harsher. For example, having been led to judge Sulla more severely than Lysander, the *synkrisis* stresses that the latter harmed his state (Sparta) more than Sulla harmed Rome, leaving us wondering to what extent, in making judgements, the nature of a person's impact needs to outweigh other factors. Similarly, the *synkrisis* of Alcibiades and Coriolanus, having begun by giving the impression that the judgement is very much in favour of the former, concludes with an overall judgement that does not fit with what has gone before:

> For his temperance, continence, and probity, he (Coriolanus) might claim to be compared with the best and purest of the Greeks; not in any sort with Alcibiades, the least scrupulous and most entirely careless of human beings in all these points. (Plutarch, 1876, p. 171)

The reader here is left wondering whether she or he has misread the earlier summaries, whether what is at stake is some rank ordering of moral qualities and criteria for success that she or he needs to understand better, whether this is just an example of sloppy and hasty writing, or whether this is a message to the effect that judgements of this kind are difficult and complex and that readers need to go away and think further about them. Recent scholars, with good reason, incline towards the last explanation (Duff, 1999, pp. 181, 249, 266, 281). An emphasis on the complexity and ambiguity of Plutarch's

moral thinking about his heroes may of course also reflect a contemporary thirst for these qualities in an intellectual world that prides itself on being allergic to certainty and simplicity and on its ability to sniff out difference and diversity in places where less sophisticated folk in the past have failed to notice them.

PLUTARCH IN THE RENAISSANCE

Knowledge of and interest in Plutarch at the end of the Middle Ages began to be revived in Western Europe partly as a result of the arrival of Greek speakers fleeing from a Byzantium increasingly taken over by the Ottomans. Already at the end of the fourteenth century, copies of some of the *Lives* were circulating, at least locally, in Tuscan and Aragonese, and a copy in modern Greek also appeared, though most of the effort initially went into translating Plutarch into Latin (Pade, 2023, pp. 325–327; Pérez Jiménez, 2023, p. 340). Latin versions of *Lives* relating to the Roman Republic appeared in Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century at a time when Florence's independence as a city state was being threatened. Florentine intellectuals such as the humanist Leonardo Bruni felt a strong affinity with an earlier civic, republican culture, which, like theirs, had also at times been under attack. Florentine manuscript versions of other *Lives* continued to be made, leading eventually to the publication in Rome of the first print edition of almost the entire corpus of *Parallel Lives* in Latin in 1470 (Mitchell, 1961, pp. 7–8; Pade, 2023, pp. 328–332, 338). Some of the manuscript versions were splendidly illustrated such as a north Italian version of eight *Lives* dating from the 1460s, now in the British Museum, in which each *Life* has a tailpiece depicting in most cases the death or triumph of the hero; particularly striking examples are a portrait of Cato the Younger in his house looking serene against a dreamy background and a depiction of the scene where Tiberius Gracchus is clubbed to death on the Capitol (Mitchell, 1961, p. 17 and *passim*).

Essays from the *Moralia* were also, meanwhile, being translated into Latin. Erasmus, who read Plutarch throughout his life and who compared his works with the Bible, dedicated his Latin translation of Plutarch's treatise *On Flattery* in 1513 to Henry VIII. The following year, he dedicated another treatise to Cardinal Wolsey. Other humanists such as Poliziano in Italy and Reformers like Melanchthon and Zwingli greatly admired his work (Plutarch, 1992, p. 2; Russell, 1972, p. 148).

Further vernacular versions of parts of Plutarch's writings also began to appear, increasing in frequency with the arrival of printing. Translations were often from the Latin rather than the Greek, or indeed from one vernacular version to another, even though printed Greek editions of Plutarch's works, in which Erasmus had been involved, became available in the sixteenth century. The target audience for vernacular versions was often as much laymen and women as the scholars and churchmen for whom the Latin versions were mainly intended. Versions of parts of Plutarch in French, Italian, German, Spanish, and English were all in circulation by the mid-sixteenth century (Highet, 1949, p. 623). Henry Parker, Lord Morley, sent his English translation of the *Lives* of Theseus and Aemilius Paulus as a New Year present to Henry VIII of England (Copeland, 2016, p. 528). Whether the good counsel for rulers they contained was read is not known. It is clear that his daughter Elizabeth I was reading Plutarch both at the beginning and end of her reign, and at least initially in Greek as well as Latin, but we have no evidence of this kind for her father (Mueller & Scodel, 2009, pp. 374, 379).

The most widely-read vernacular translations and the ones with the largest literary impact did not appear until the second half of the sixteenth century. The first and most important *Les Vies des hommes illustres, Grecs et Romains* (*The Lives of Illustrious Men, Greek and Roman*) was that of the French scholar and cleric Jacques Amyot in 1559, dedicated to Henry II of France. The translation was directly from the Greek, though he also made use of both earlier Latin and French versions. His translation of the *Moralia* into French followed in 1572. Both were in due course widely read, and not just in France, and had a major impact, either directly or indirectly, on the two greatest European writers of the sixteenth century, Montaigne and Shakespeare. 'Plutarch became a Frenchman', observed a modern translator of Plutarch, 'and, in the eyes of that nation has remained so ever since' (Plutarch, 1992, p. 2). Amyot's translation had in places both expanded and rewritten some of the *Lives* but, despite being 'task'd for an infinite number of mistakes' by Dryden, Montaigne praised it for its beauty, and the leading nineteenth-century French literary critic Sainte-Beuve described it as one of the masterpieces of French prose (Dryden, 1971, p. 258; Konstantinovic, 1989, p. 2; Spencer, 1964, p. 9).

It was Amyot's French version that served as the basis for the 1579 translation by Thomas North used by Shakespeare. North had gone to France in the entourage of his older brother, who had been sent on a special embassy to the French court, and returned with a copy of Amyot's *Vies des hommes illustres*. The translation went through two further versions, the third version in 1603

being dedicated to Elizabeth I, who had earlier knighted him. Dryden was even more critical of North than of Amyot – full of 'the rubbish of Antiquated words' and 'not only ungrammatical and ungraceful, but in many places almost unintelligible'. The literary historian Gilbert Highet, more recently, has dismissed North's work as 'a second-hand English translation of a second-rate Greek historian' (Dryden, 1971, p. 228; Highet, 1949, p. 210). One should take neither of them seriously: Dryden was energetically promoting his own business venture, and dismissive of a time when English was still 'unpolish'd', and Highet was applying Rankean standards to a work that knew nothing of them and therefore made no great effort to meet them. Shakespeare can have had few doubts about the quality of North's presentation of Plutarch, proving the kind of general reader eager to feel the texture of human lives in a story in the way that North had in mind when he wrote in his preface:

> There is no prophane studye better than Plutarke. All other learning is private, fitter for Universities than cities, fuller of contemplacion than experience, more commendable in the students themselves, than profitable unto others. Whereas stories are fit for every place, reache to all persons, serve for all tymes, teache the living, revive the dead, so farre excelling all other bookes, as it is better to see learning in noble mens lives than to read it in Philosophers writings. (Plutarch, 1927, p. xi)

Neither Amyot nor North, however, at least initially, had the readership for their *Lives* which one might have expected. This was for the simple reason that, in the second half of the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, lengthy and heavy works such as these (well over a thousand pages in North's case) were only available in large expensive folio editions aimed at the libraries of noblemen and institutions – not at the large number of other potential readers who, by this time, existed but could not afford to buy them (Cheney & Hardie, 2015, pp. 66–67; Spencer, 1964, p. 13).

'THE MAN FOR ME': PLUTARCH AND MONTAIGNE

Among the many classical authors whose writings inform and stimulate Montaigne's three books of *Essays* (1580, 1588, 1595), Plutarch and Seneca stand out as by far and away the most influential, though with Montaigne

making ten times the number of references to Plutarch than he does to Seneca. In his essay *In Defence of Seneca and Plutarch,* Montaigne begins by saying:

> My intimacy with those two great men and the help they give to me in my old age, as well as to my book which is built entirely out of their spoils, bind me to espouse their honour. (Montaigne, 2003, p. 817)

Although an extraordinarily fluent Latinist, Montaigne's Greek was much less developed, and it is largely only to Plato and Plutarch among Greek authors to whom he refers. In Plutarch's case, it is very much the Amyot translation whose beauty he often praises, to the extent of crediting Amyot with inspiring him to write his *Essays* (MacDonald, 2023, p. 383). Plutarch's writings reveal the man to such an extent, says Montaigne, that he feels he knows him and can penetrate 'even into his soul'. He is often, to Montaigne, 'notre Plutarque'. He is 'my very own Plutarch – so perfect, so outstanding a judge of human actions', 'amazing in every respect but especially where he makes judgements on men's actions' (Montaigne, 2003, pp. 389, 809, 812; Konstantinovic, 1989, p. 2). He praises Plutarch – 'the most judicious author in the world' – for the wisdom of his comparisons between the characters in the *Parallel Lives,* as 'the man for me' among historians because of his focus on the huge diversity of people's 'inward qualities' and motives rather than on events, for the fairness with which he judges Romans and Greeks side by side, and for his refusal to resort to crude overall judgements (Montaigne, 2003, p. 467, 818, 822–823; MacDonald, 2023, p. 392).

Isabelle Konstantinovic's monumental analysis *Montaigne et Plutarque* records 88 occasions in the *Essays* in which Plutarch is named, half of which involve some kind of comment, overwhelmingly positive, on the part of Montaigne. She lists 293 *emprunts* (borrowings) from Plutarch's works, in some of which Plutarch is deliberately not named because, as Montaigne says, 'I have to hide my weakness beneath those great reputations' and 'I want them (his readers) to flick Plutarch's nose in mistake for mine' (Montaigne, 2003, p. 458). Only three of the *Lives* included in Amyot's edition are not mentioned anywhere in the *Essays.* The *Life of Alexander* is referred to the largest number of times (36), followed by that of Caesar (21), with Montaigne showing considerable interest in what we learn from studying and comparing the careers of these two complex characters to whom he felt varying degrees of sympathy and antipathy. Large numbers of references to Cato the Younger (17), Pompey (15), and Brutus (12) also indicate a particular interest in the last years of

the Roman Republic and the issues thrown up by that period – in relation to order, civil war, social conflict, monarchy, and republicanism – many of which resonated with events in France and Europe in Montaigne's own times.

Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus,* the legendary founder of Sparta, and Spartan customs more generally, about which Plutarch also writes in his *Moralia,* are of particular interest to Montaigne. His essays *On Schoolmasters' Learning* and *On Educating Children* are highly critical of contemporary education, including that provided by fellow humanists. He was dismissive of 'book learning' and schools that flogged pupils 'into retaining a pannierful of learning'. All this does, he says, is to produce 'donkeys laden with books' (Montaigne, 2003, p. 199). Sparta provides a useful antidote to this kind of education, given its emphasis on the development of character and on making people better and wiser. He praises Plutarch's Lycurgus for appreciating the crucial importance of education for the welfare of the state, for his focus on active, practical learning, and for creating a state whose people were noted for their simplicity of manners, disdain for luxury, brevity of utterance, courage, self-discipline, and commitment to the common good (Tate, 2015, pp. 54–65).

In some ways, Montaigne's anti-individualist pro-Spartan stance, borrowed from Plutarch but taken further than Plutarch did, represents a challenge to the unexamined pro-Athenian preferences of his humanist contemporaries. In addition, it has been suggested that, as well as a challenge to the *pensée unique* of the intellectual elite of his day, Montaigne's praise of Sparta can also be seen as an assertion of his aristocratic credentials. Like the Spartan elite, French noblemen do not need to sit for years in schoolrooms to pick up the habits that will enable them to rule (MacPhail, 2002). Montaigne, like other major writers over the centuries, used Plutarch for his own purposes; indeed, he created his own Plutarch to meet his own needs.

Most fundamentally, for Montaigne, what Plutarch did was to exemplify and fortify his own inclinations, both personally and politically. The aim of the *Essays* is self-scrutiny and self-knowledge with a view to self-improvement. Montaigne writes about himself, his experiences, feelings, opinions, relationships with others (including with other writers), and responses to a wide variety of situations (including all those presented to him in the huge number of books with which he surrounded himself in his tower). The purpose of his reading, reflection, and writing was to help him to know himself and to learn 'how to live and die well', and, through this, to help his readers do the same (Montaigne, 2003, p. 459). In Plutarch, he found a congenial companion, all the more important to him after the death of his much-loved

flesh-and-blood companion Étienne de la Boétie in 1563. Plutarch revealed relatively little in his writings about himself, but he also saw his writings about the characters and lives of great men and about practical ethics as enabling him to know himself and to help his readers to do the same. Politically, Montaigne also found himself in tune with Plutarch's emphasis on moderation and the Aristotelian mean, with his 'gentle judgements' on people, and with his stress on the need to curb the excesses of ambition and passion.

Montaigne's vision of human beings eschewing the search for glory and privileging peace and stability has been seen as a kind of humanistic liberalism, one that values the integrity, moderation, and incorruptibility of Plutarchan heroes such as Phocion and Epaminondas.[14] The message inherent in this humanistic liberalism is that the world's problems are not best tackled by 'utopian dreams of political perfection' and endless top-down social engineering, but through individuals and ethical communities focused on knowing themselves and committed to learning how to live good lives. In the early twenty-first century, it is a message, with at least some of its roots in Antiquity, highly relevant to a Western civilisation at times seemingly addicted to its very opposite (Gillespie, 1985).

PLUTARCH AND SHAKESPEARE

The new versions of the *Lives* that appeared in the late sixteenth century had a major impact on the development of European literature, stimulating an interest in biography as a genre. They led to a spate of biographies of both contemporary and ancient lives, most notably in France, Italy, and Spain, and also provided a source for historical tragedies in both Spain (Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca) and France (Corneille and Racine). They had a particularly significant impact on England where influences from Plutarch permeate a large number of Shakespeare's plays and can also be found in the works of others such as Ben Jonson and George Chapman (MacDonald, 2023, pp. 394–400: Pade, 2023, pp. 335–337; Pérez Jiménez, 2023, pp. 347, 349–351; Griffin, 2023, p. 363).

[14] Montaigne greatly regretted that Plutarch's *Life of Epaminondas,* the fourth-century BC Theban general and statesman who was felt to have been free of all personal ambition, had not survived. In Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas,* the close friend of Epaminondas, the latter is described as a man of great courage, temperance, justice, generosity, and patriotism (Plutarch, 1876, p. 205).

Shakespeare was familiar with three main classical authors: Ovid, Seneca, and Plutarch. Ovid may have been his favourite, but Plutarch was the one he followed most closely when writing his plays and North's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes,* the book to which he appears to have paid the most attention. Given the very close references to Plutarch's text in some of his plays, Shakespeare clearly had this large and cumbersome folio frequently at his side while writing. For his *Julius Caesar,* he had obviously read carefully the *Lives* of Caesar, Brutus, and Mark Antony, and in particular that of Brutus. But it is in the later plays *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* that he followed Plutarch most closely. He paid much less attention to the Greek *Lives,* making use only of those of Alcibiades and Timon, and was generally fairly ignorant of things Greek, as *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida* both illustrate (Spencer, 1964, pp. 13–16; Highet, 1949, pp. 203, 210–214).

Shakespeare's use of Plutarch, however, extended far beyond this. The *Alexander* of Plutarch helps to give Shakespeare's *Henry V* a distinctively Plutarchan shape that is different from that of the other history plays. The marriage of Brutus and Portia can be seen behind the depiction of Lady Percy in *Henry IV,* and references deriving from Plutarch can be found in each of *Cymbeline, Hamlet, Macbeth, Henry IV Part 2,* and *Henry VI Part 2.* Caesar's 'I came, saw, and overcame', as reported in Plutarch, is quoted three times: by Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 2,* Rosalind in *As You Like It,* and the Queen in *Cymbeline.* Even when there is no link with the account of a particular life, Shakespeare uses Plutarchan names in many places 'cut loose from their histories' (Griffin, 2023, p. 381). It has even been suggested that Shakespeare's concern with 'interiority' in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* owes something to Plutarch's treatment of Brutus and that, in this sense, 'North's Plutarch – North's performance of Plutarch – is somewhere close to the centre of Shakespeare's artistic life' (Cheney & Hardie, 2015, p. 67, 73). Shakespeare astutely saw Plutarch as much a moralist and psychologist as a narrator of great events and the uncertainties, complexities, and doubleness of his characterisations of Plutarchan characters reflect his main source (Mathieu-Castellani, 2004, pp. 9–10).

How Shakespeare uses and modifies Plutarch is worth study. As an example, the following is the account from Plutarch of how Cleopatra, ignoring and mocking Anthony's summons to meet her, asserts her independence, creates an aura of mystery around herself, and begins the flirtation that leads to them becoming lovers. This is how Amyot describes her elaborate self-display (orthography modernised):

> Elle n'en daigna autrement s'avancer, sinon que de se mettre sur le fleuve Cydnus dedans un bateau, dont la poupe était d'or, les voiles de pourpre, les rames d'argent, que l'on maniait au son et à la cadence d'une musique de flûtes, hautbois, cythres, violes et autres tels instruments dont on jouait dedans. Et au reste, quant à sa personne, elle était couchée dessous un pavillon d'or tissu, vêtue et accoutrée toute en la sorte que l'on peint ordinairement Vénus, et auprès d'elle d'un côté et d'autre, de beaux petits enfants habillés ne plus ne moins que les peintres ont accoutumé de portraire les Amours, avec des éventaux en leurs mains, dont ils l'éventaient. (Plutarque, 1802, p. 302)

Turning this into English, North stays close to Amyot:

> She disdanied to set forth otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, howboys, citherns, viols, and other such instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of her self: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. (Plutarch, 1899, pp. 33–34)

Shakespeare then uses all this brilliantly to create the following account of the event, as reported in the play by Enobarbus, a character mentioned in passing by Plutarch but to whom Shakespeare gives a larger role:

> *Enobarbus:* When she first met Mark Antony she pursed up his heart, upon the river of Cydnus.
> *Agrippa:* There she appeared indeed, or my reporter devised well for her.
> *Enobarbus:* I will tell you
> The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
> Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold,
> Purple the sails, and so perfumed, that
> The winds were love-sick with them, the oars were silver
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
> The water which they beat to follow faster,
> As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,

> It beggared all description; she did lie
> In her pavilion – cloth-of-gold of tissue –
> O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
> The fancy outwork nature; on each side her
> Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
> With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem
> To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
> And what they undid did. (Shakespeare, 1994, pp. 191–192)

Shakespeare takes hold of the elements and combines them in different ways to create something that is very much his own. He builds up the imagery and alliteration: the 'barge', which 'burned' on the water, the 'burnished throne', the 'beaten' gold. He adds an erotic undercurrent: the winds are 'love-sick', the water 'amorous'. There is a new hint of instability, of something momentous in the making (Cleopatra as instrument of Mark Antony's downfall and death), even of menace: 'she pursed up his heart'. Plutarch, via North and Amyot, has given him an incident and the beginnings of a characterisation of Cleopatra. Shakespeare has turned it into a great work of art, which, though true in varying degrees to both the Greek original and the two translations, is also something wholly new (Griffin, 2023, pp. 374–376).

PLUTARCH AND ROUSSEAU

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Plutarch eventually became, as Ian Kidd has put it, the kind of 'author whom every person of culture claimed to have read, or at least felt they would read if they ever got round to it' (Plutarch, 1992, p. 3). Amyot's translations both of the *Parallel Lives* and of the *Moralia* went through many new editions by the middle of the seventeenth century, and they were widely read both inside and outside France. The influence of the *Lives* extended to painting, many of Nicolas Poussin's drawings and paintings in the 1630s and 1640s being inspired by reading Plutarch. In addition to illustrating events from the lives of heroes, Poussin also used images of the austere but gentle Phocion in his landscape paintings (MacDonald, 2023, pp. 400–401).[15] Around the same time, a spate

[15] The paintings containing depictions of Phocion are *Landscape with the Body of Phocion Carried Out of Athens* (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff) and *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

of historical plays drawing on the Roman *Lives,* while glossing over Plutarch's sympathies for those who opposed autocracy, followed each other on the French stage, only Corneille's *Horace* (1640) managing subtly to escape Richelieu's censorship through the introduction of a character capable of injecting into the play the kind of balance and moral comprehensiveness characteristic of Plutarch and missing in the works of his fellow dramatists (Clarke, 1994; MacDonald, 2023, pp. 398–399). Later in the century, as already mentioned, Plutarch played a role both in the life and works of Racine and in his relationship with his royal patron Louis XIV (MacDonald, 2023, pp. 399–400). In England, the *Lives* and the *Moralia* continued to influence major writers such as Bacon, Jeremy Taylor, and Dryden, the latter's translation of the *Lives* increasingly replacing North's version.

It was in the eighteenth century that Plutarch's influence was at its height. Plutarch's view of the moral purposes of biography and history fitted well with the widespread assumptions of the period and were instrumental in their turn in helping to shape them, as did the emphases – moderation, self-discipline, the supremacy of reason – to be found in Plutarch's practical ethics. The Enlightenment's interest in republicanism and constitutional monarchy found echoes in, and again were influenced by, what readers found in Plutarch. Opponents of what was felt to be despotism and obscurantism found much to inspire them in Plutarch's *Lives* of Timoleon, Cato the Younger, Dion, Brutus, and Cicero, among others. For Edward Gibbon, the historian, the *Parallel Lives* were 'a school of freedom and of valour' (Gibbon, 1994, p. lxviii, footnote 6). The one aspect of Plutarch about which some Enlightenment figures were sceptical was the historical veracity of the *Lives,* Voltaire doubting whether they were indeed history and dismissing them as a collection of anecdotes and moral maxims. This was a scepticism that was bound to grow as a more 'professional' Rankean style of historical writing developed in the nineteenth century (MacDonald, 2023, pp. 392–393).

The one eighteenth-century writer who bears comparison with Montaigne and Shakespeare for the degree to which he was influenced by Plutarch is Rousseau. Some of Plutarch's influence on Rousseau came indirectly via Montaigne, who was his favourite French writer. In *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*) (1776–1778), written at the very end of his life, Rousseau remarks that:

> Among the small number of books I still sometimes read is Plutarch who keeps my attention and brings me something of value. He was the first

> person I read as a child and will be the last I read in old age; he is about the only author I have never read without gaining some benefit from doing so. (Rousseau, 1972, p. 73. Translation by the author)

The effect of reading Plutarch as a child, he recalled in his *Dialogues* (1772–1776), was so powerful as to transport his soul to regions remote from those inhabited currently by his body (Rousseau, 1999, p. 234). In his *Confessions,* Rousseau reports first turning to the *Parallel Lives* at the age of seven in the winter of 1719–1720. He spent his days in his father's workshop devouring both these and works by Ovid, Bossuet, Molière, La Bruyère, and others, 'believing myself to be a Greek or Roman'. Plutarch quickly became his favourite, and he read and re-read his favourite *Lives,* with a strong preference for those of Brutus and the Greek heroes Agesilaus and Aristides. He traced back to this early reading, as well as to the fierce *genevois* patriotism and republicanism of his father, his lifelong hatred of oppression and thirst for justice. As with much that is autobiographical in Rousseau, and as with some of the claims of later revolutionaries to have had their view of the world turned upside down by reading classical writers, some of this needs to be taken with a pinch of salt (Rousseau, 1999, pp. 30–32; Parker, 1965, *passim*).

Rousseau shared Montaigne's interest in Sparta and in Plutarch's accounts of its rulers and way of life. The Spartan emphasis on active learning, self-discipline, and control of the passions, and on character and virtue at the expense of book learning, help to shape the education that Rousseau envisages for Émile in *Émile ou de l'éducation.* The superiority of Sparta over Athens in terms of the perceptions of the two city states as to what matters in life is at the heart of Rousseau's denunciation of the arts and sciences in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts,* which launched his career (Rousseau, c. 1930, p. 25; Keller, 1939). It has also been suggested that, even though there is no direct mention of Plutarch in Rousseau's even more influential *Discours sur l'inégalité,* it can nonetheless be seen to be permeated by notions about human beings and societies derived directly from his contemporary reading and copying out of long passages from Plutarch's *Moralia* (Morel, 1926). What needs to be stressed, however, about this 'reception' of Plutarch is that in some cases it was not so much, or even not at all, Plutarch's ideas that were being 'received' but the information he was conveying about the world of antiquity, which was providing arguments or suggesting analogies useful in contemporary debates. There is little in relation to what we know about Plutarch's views that suggests he might have looked favourably on

the kind of education recommended for Émile or, despite his Platonism, at Rousseau's 'case against the arts' in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (Tate, 2016, pp. 31–32). The same point can be made about some of the ways in which Plutarch was used, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, during the revolutionary period that followed Rousseau's death.

DECLINE AND REVIVAL: PLUTARCH FROM THE 1800S ONWARDS

Perhaps the acme of claims about the educative power inherent in Plutarch's writings was reached in 1818 with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The monster in this story stumbles upon a case of books, one of which, to his great delight, is a volume of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives,* the others being Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* – unwitting testimony perhaps to the status of Plutarch at the time Shelley was writing. The monster's admiration goes out to those Plutarchan characters such as Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus, who are peaceful, constructive lawgivers, committed to the general good, whom he sees as exemplars of what humanity ought to be like. Reading Plutarch gives him 'high thoughts', raises him 'above the wretched sphere of my own reflections', and inspires him to 'the greatest ardour for virtue … and abhorrence for vice'. For Mary Shelley, Plutarch is clearly 'a necessary read in the self-formation of a civilised being' (Shelley, 1992, pp. 112–113; Vance & Wallace, 2015, pp. 150, 292; Pade, 2023, pp. 337–338).[16]

For the rest of the century, Plutarch continued to be read, with the poet Arthur Clough's version of the Dryden translation (1859), interestingly as much directed at the US as at the British market, becoming the main source for the *Lives* (France & Haynes, 2006, pp. 230–231; Vance & Wallace, 2015, p. 505). Thomas Jones, while working a thirteen-hour day in the iron works at Rhymney in South Wales, kept Plutarch's memory alive by reading the copy in the local Workmen's Institute Library. Another working-class autodidact, the highly successful publisher J. M. Dent brought out a more affordable ten-volume edition in 1898, copies of which one still stumbles upon in contemporary second-hand bookshops (Rose, 2001, pp. 33–34, 132–133). But

[16] Walter Scott, one of our other seven authors, reviewed Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1819, the year following its publication, and later called it his favourite work of fiction (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 217–218).

the extent of the enthusiasm shown by Goethe, Beethoven, and Emerson (in the case of the latter, Plutarch being seen as next in importance only to Plato and Shakespeare) became rarer, especially as the century advanced. General Gordon might be found towards the latter part of the nineteenth century recommending Plutarch as useful reading for young officers, but Plutarch's reputation had waned long before that time (Russell, 1972, p. 162).

There were four main reasons for this. The first was the change in attitudes towards the practice of history, in particular through the influence of Ranke and his followers in Germany. In light of the aims and practices of a more 'scientific' history, Plutarch's *Lives* were found to be sorely wanting. The growing use of alternative sources for the study of the history of antiquity revealed how limited some of Plutarch's traditional source material had been. At the same time, it became the practice to apply to all sources used in studying ancient history more demanding rules about accuracy and veracity than Plutarch had ever felt to be either possible or necessary. Even more fundamentally, the notion that history was a branch of moral philosophy and a means to human improvement began to fade from view. Thus, Plutarch came to be judged mainly as a source for the periods and people he wrote about and, as such, was inevitably found to be deficient in many respects. As a result, the impression developed, in the words of Gilbert Highet, who in the mid-twentieth century can still be found reflecting some of these nineteenth-century assumptions, that Plutarch was merely a 'second-rate Greek historian' (Highet, 1949, pp. 203, 210).

The second reason is the dominance in the nineteenth century of a view of the ancient world that very much revolved around fifth-century Athens and the idea that it was from this source above all that the classical tradition arose. Although Plutarch wrote about great men of that period, it was far from his only or main focus, and he had good things to say about Sparta as well, which did not necessarily go down well with Athenian enthusiasts. Also, although Greek scholars have continued to praise many features of his literary style, his language is not necessarily to the taste of someone more used to the language of Thucydides, Xenophon, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, and others writing over five hundred years previously and inclined to regard this as the true Greek style. Even Dryden, enthusiastic though he was about Plutarch, had apologised for his 'roughness of expression', the result of the original 'splendour' of the Greek tongue having been tarnished by 'Barbarism' and 'the filth and spots of degenerating Ages' (Dryden, 1971, p. 279).

Third, Plutarch came to be disliked in some quarters because of ways in which he had been read that had little to do with what he was trying to say. From Hobbes onwards, some of the great writers of antiquity, including Plutarch, through their presentation of Athenian and Roman republicanism, have been seen as dangerous vehicles through which a radical and revolutionary spirit can be stimulated among their 'modern' readers. Critics of the excesses of the French Revolution, including Volney, Aulard, and Chateaubriand, were quick to blame these on the idolatry shown by revolutionaries towards the republican heroes of Antiquity (Parker, 1965, pp. 1–7). The nineteenth-century English historian and politician Macaulay specifically named Plutarch as firing the 'heated imagination' of revolutionaries and forging their 'perverted principles'. The Franco-Swiss writer Benjamin Constant also feared the way ancient writers encouraged the people to get directly engaged politically rather than leaving it to their representatives (Liebert, 2016, pp. 12–13, 45). Seen like this, Plutarch is a danger to be avoided, despite the fact that his *Lives* are eloquent about the failings as well as successes of Greek and Roman republicanism. Conservative critics of the revolutionaries did not fail to point this out (Parker, 1965, p. 87).

Similarly, Plutarch had often been associated with a set of ideals centred on valour and with the eulogising of great men as patriotic heroes. Although his treatment of his subjects was infinitely more subtle than this and his heroes never categorised as such without reservation and nuance, the case for 'great men' made, in very different ways, by writers such as de Tocqueville, Carlyle, Nietzsche, and, in early twentieth-century Germany, Stefan George, contributed to deepening the association in people's minds between Plutarch and hero worship. Nietzsche was very explicit in urging people to 'satiate your soul with Plutarch and when you believe in his heroes dare at the same time to believe in yourself' (Liebert, 2016, pp. 2, 4, 14, 18–19; Flint, 1919; Tritle, 1995).[17] Others, more in tune with the growth of liberalism and democracy, lost interest in heroes and, insofar as he had come to be associated with them, with Plutarch. In the United States, women who during the early years of the Republic compared themselves with Portia, the wife of Brutus, Cornelia, the mother of the third-century BC republican heroes the Gracchi, or the women of Sparta, ceased to find such comparisons appealing and, by the time

[17] For a discussion of Nietzsche's often quite Plutarchan view of what history ought to be like, see Berkowitz, 1994.

of the women's movement of the early twentieth century, no longer turned to classical antiquity for inspiration (Winterer, 2007, pp. 1–3, 9–11, 73–78, 179).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, classical antiquity ceased to be at the centre of the consciousness of modern societies in the way in which – quite extraordinarily – it had been during the American and French revolutions. This was partly the result of the rapidity of the economic, social, and demographic changes sweeping Europe and North America and the new issues that these threw up, all of which pushed societies further away from their imagined origins in an increasingly distant-seeming world. It was also a consequence of the growth of new ways of studying the natural and social worlds and the implications these had for the focus of education. Although the nineteenth century produced a vast amount of classical scholarship and large numbers of educated men (and some women) continued to be knowledgeable about the classical world and conversant, to varying degrees, with Latin and Greek, this knowledge and this facility with classical languages was in marked decline, as the chapter on Cicero has shown. Knowledge of Plutarch in Britain had never depended to any great extent on familiarity with classical languages, ever since the appearance of English translations in the second half of the sixteenth century, but the ambient classical culture had greatly helped to keep it afloat. As this faded, the classical heritage from being a very public one, fronted by people like Edmund Burke, Camille Desmoulins, and John Adams in their respective legislatures at the end of the eighteenth century, dwindled into one that was essentially private.

It was this shifting of the heritage of Greece and Rome from the public domain to the private and from the centre of society, where it had been for centuries, to the periphery, which T. S. Eliot in his essay 'The Classics and the Man of Letters' rightly saw as an occurrence of immense historical significance – an event as profound as 'the transition from an old language to a new one' and one pregnant with unknown consequences (Eliot, 2024, 803–816).

It is impossible to say that Plutarch has become any less peripheral to our cultural consciousness over the last hundred years. Writing in 1992, in a preface to a translation of a selection of the *Essays,* Ian Kidd feels that Plutarch 'has a strong claim to be the best essayist of the Graeco-Roman world' but that 'he may also claim the dubious reputation of being one of the least read today' and that having descended from heights 'when he was unduly admired for quite the wrong reasons', he is now 'unduly neglected for no sufficient reason at all' (Plutarch, 1992, p. 1). As with Cicero and Boethius, modern scholarship – helped by demography, the expansion of higher education, and

information technology – has greatly enhanced our knowledge and understanding of Plutarch, and enabled a huge range of fruitful discussions about his writings and legacy to take place. This has also helped to shift the debate about Plutarch away from his historical accuracy and value, or otherwise, as a source for Greek and Roman history towards a willingness to judge him on the basis of what he is trying to achieve, through analysing his opinions, purposes, themes, and style and placing him within his own times.

Christopher Pelling, the great Plutarch scholar, reports an exceptional rise in the number of articles devoted to Plutarch by comparison with other classical writers since the 1920s, as well as a surge in the general public's interest (Plutarch, 1968, p. ix). Readily accessible and highly readable new English translations of some of the *Lives* have appeared, some of which try hard to capture some of the 'brightness and vigour of the original' normally lost in modern translations (Plutarch, 2017; Russell, 1972, p. 23). The Clough version remains available online free of charge. The *Moralia* have often done just as much in the past for Plutarch's reputation as the *Lives* but suffer from a decline in demand for writings that do not hesitate to tell one what is right and what is wrong; unsurprisingly, as a result, they have attracted fewer modern versions.

WHY READ PLUTARCH TODAY?

In the introduction to his *Life of Timoleon,* the fourth-century BC Greek statesman and general, Plutarch tells us why he is writing these *Parallel Lives* and, in doing so, gives us reasons why we should read them:

> It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. Indeed, it can be compared to nothing but daily living and associating together; we receive, as it were, in our inquiry, and entertain each successive guest, view their stature and qualities, and select from their actions all that is noblest and worthiest to know. Ah, and what greater pleasure could one have or, what more effective means to one's moral improvement? (Plutarch, 1876, p. 172)

Plutarch stands out among classical historians in his interest in all aspects of an individual's life. He moves beyond the specific features of individuals to

general issues about human beings, such as the role of ambition, the search for honour, the nature of character, the interplay between reason and passion, the need for flexibility, the importance of friendship, the influence of education, susceptibility to flattery, and the part played by Fortune in people's lives. His *Lives* are rich in both narrative and description, full of anecdotes, images, and metaphors, with elements of pathos, suspense, tragedy, and the epic. The moral lessons on occasion can be crude, but this is rare. Many of Plutarch's judgements are highly nuanced and, for much of the time, by presenting a variety of perspectives on an individual and a range of comparators against whom he can be judged, he leaves it to his readers both to make up their own minds about his characters and, if they wish to follow his example, to reflect on what implications these characters have for themselves and their desire to 'live well and die well'.

Plutarch was therefore an educator, as Montaigne, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley fully appreciated. One reason for his popularity in Renaissance times was the coincidence of his views about teaching by means of examples with those of humanist educators of that period (Pade, 2023, p. 338). Above all, he was an unobtrusive moral educator, seeing character through the prism of virtues and vices but generally leaving moral and political lessons implicit, encouraging readers to join with him in exploring how moral principles applied to particular individuals and circumstances and, in so doing, to educate themselves (Duff, 2023, pp. 65–78). Contemporary educators, bombarded with pressures to focus on the utilitarian and the immediately relevant, would benefit from looking at how Plutarch exemplifies the way the study of individual mentalities in history and literature can help in the development of what the contemporary French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut sees as the aim and potential outcome of a humanist or liberal education – the development of what he calls *le coeur intelligent* (the intelligent heart) (Finkielkraut, 2009).

Plutarch was not a theorist and, it has been said, 'is not and does not want to be an original thinker' (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 1995, p. 56). That does not mean that his practical ethics and his judgements of character are not endlessly interesting. As Hugh Liebert in recent writings has also pointed out, Plutarch should also not be seen just as a moralist but also as a writer with a real contribution to make to political thought, above all in the relevance of the situations he analyses in which issues of identity and subsidiarity, and continuity and change, are concerned.

At a much simpler level, one goes back to the *Parallel Lives* for its fascinating stories (which are sometimes more legend than fact) about famous

episodes in Greek and Roman history. If you are curious enough to want to know how many dagger blows the dying Caesar received, why the wealthy Crassus lived in a cave as a young man, how the sculptor Phidias met his end, what Agesilaus was doing with a hobbyhorse, and what happened in the throne room of the Persian emperor Darius after his defeat by Alexander, Plutarch is the man to tell you (Roskam, 2021, pp. 89–90).

Plutarch is also worth reading because, like Cicero and Boethius, he has been at the heart of the intellectual experience of so many educated people in Europe and North America for so many centuries. Reading Plutarch, one does not just enter into the early years of the Roman Empire in which he lived, or the earlier periods in the histories of Greece and Rome about which he wrote, but also into the mind of Shakespeare as he composed *Anthony and Cleopatra,* Montaigne as he sat in his tower reading and re-reading the *Lives* of Caesar and Lycurgus, Racine as night after night, close to death himself, he read the *Life of Alexander* to an elderly Louis XIV, Charlotte Corday as she walked the streets of Paris *en route* to killing Marat, Beethoven as he lay on his deathbed, C. P. Cavafy as he recalled in his poems the centuries-old Hellenic inheritance of the Greek diaspora[18] and General Gordon as his life moved towards its bloody and tragic Plutarchan conclusion at the end of the siege of Khartoum. Reading the *Parallel Lives* with this knowledge brings together in one long common thread so many aspects of an ancient and immensely fruitful civilisation and helps one to locate oneself within the stream of history.

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

There is a tendency in publishing selections of the *Lives* to focus principally on figures who are best known – Caesar, Mark Antony, Alexander, Pericles, and so on – and on better-known periods in Greco-Roman history such as the last years of the Roman Republic. The best way to take one's reading further is to dip into the *Lives* of people from other periods and whom one knows less about or, in some cases, whom one has never heard of in any other context. I have found the Clough version on my Kindle invaluable in enabling me to

[18] Cavafy quotes Plutarch in his 1929 poem 'Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians', based on an episode in the life of the late sixth-century and early fifth-century BC Spartan king Kleomenis (Cleomenes). Cavafy wrote a second poem 'In Sparta' (1928) on the same theme (Cavafy, 1975, pp. 110, 122).

make my first acquaintance with Agesilaus by a Cypriot swimming pool and with Timoleon late at night in Nice airport while waiting for a delayed plane.

If one has enjoyed the *Lives,* dipping into the equally monumental *Moralia* or *Essays* might be the next step. There is often a crossover between the two, with Plutarch's fascination with Alexander also being reflected in parts of the *Moralia* and with an essay on 'How to distinguish a flatterer from a friend', taking as an example Alcibiades, whose *Life* has already signalled to us that he is one of the greatest flatterers of all time. The notion of essays whose aim is principally to help one live a better life does not always go down well with one's sophisticated contemporaries. Trying out a few of these essays, such as the one on flatterers and friends – useful for anyone with major leadership responsibilities – or the one on 'Contentment' quickly disabuses one of any idea that this is going to be little more than the rehashing of moral clichés. The advice in the latter about *actively* holding on to one's good memories as a way of enhancing one's 'contentment' and thus avoiding the fate of all those who far too readily 'succumb to blind, ungrateful oblivion' is one example of a Plutarchan *aperçu* that acquires resonance the more one lets it distil in one's mind (Plutarch, 1992, p. 229). The ethical issues that Plutarch raises are ones that affect us on a daily basis, which people used to hear about when they went to church or read in the Bible, or which were once embedded in the sayings of everyday life, but which have gradually drifted away from us. Their purpose, as in the *Lives,* is to help us 'to live well and to die well'.

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3

BOETHIUS'S THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY (AD 524–525)

In his memoirs, the famous adventurer and libertine Casanova describes how, when in prison, his doctor told him that if he wished to get well, he must not be melancholy. The doctor, having bled his patient, given him some barley water, and removed all other books from his cell, handed him a copy of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy.* This, he said, was 'a very necessary instrument' to aid his recovery, to which Casanova replied: 'I am much obliged to you. It is better than Seneca. It will do me good' (Casanova, 1860, p. 51). Casanova does not say quite what good it did him in the end, except that he soon found he could not be always reading just one book, however beneficial.

If anyone needed to hear Boethius's message about putting in perspective the appetites and fleeting satisfactions of this world, it was someone with a reputation like Casanova's. He was one of countless numbers of people in most parts of Europe, who over the centuries made use of a text described by one historian of the Western classical tradition as 'one of the great best-sellers, almost greater than Vergil', 'for a thousand years one of the most influential writers in Europe', and 'one of the supreme educational books of the world' (Highet, 1949, pp. 41, 44, 571). Over the centuries, there have been over a hundred translations into twenty languages to the extent that the study of translation traditions of *The Consolation of Philosophy,* as with some of the other works in this book, is becoming an academic field in itself (Donaghey et al., 2019). Casanova was one of many prisoners also attracted by a work written by someone else unjustly imprisoned, a few of whom over the centuries were spurred by *The Consolation of Philosophy* to write down their own meditations on imprisonment, suffering, and death.

During the Middle Ages, at a time when Latin was the main written language of educated people and many other Latin texts, for this reason, remained untranslated, 'no other book, except the Bible, was so much translated'. It was thus more accessible than most classical texts to people outside the clerical and aristocratic, mostly male, elite (Highet, 1949, 571).

Echoes of the *Consolation* can be found throughout the writings of the greatest poet of the Middle Ages, Dante (c. 1265–1321), and of England's greatest medieval poet, Chaucer (c. 1343–1400). It has the distinction of having been translated by two English monarchs: King Alfred, very freely, into Old English at the end of the ninth century – the first of the twenty-four complete English translations that have been traced – and Queen Elizabeth I in the late sixteenth (Kaylor, 2015). Chaucer translated it in the late fourteenth century, as did, at least in parts, Samuel Johnson and his friend Hester Lynch Thrale ('Mrs Piozzi') in the mid-eighteenth (Dolson, 1922a; Boethius, 1999a, p. xlviii). King James I of Scotland, exiled and imprisoned in England, used it as the starting point for his poem *The Kingis Quair* in the early fifteenth century (Summers, 2004, p. 65). In the mid-seventeenth century, Stefán Ólafsson, pastor of Vallanes in north-east Iceland, whose family's unforgettable portrait beneath a crucifix and lowering sky can be seen in the National Museum of Iceland, was inspired to translate one of Boethius's most moving poems into Icelandic – one that over three centuries before Chaucer had also turned into an English lyric – changing its reference to 'the fires of Etna' to those of Hekla, a volcano whose year-long eruption in 1636–1637 Ólafsson had experienced as a boy (Eggertsdóttir, 2014, pp. 156–157, 166, 289). For Edward Gibbon, the *Consolation* was 'a golden volume', and, for Nietzsche, its 'serenity of sky and heart' a lesson to his late nineteenth-century German contemporaries (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 553; Albrecht, 1997, pp. 1732, 1734). In the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell described the work 'as admirable as the last moments of the Platonic Socrates', a philosophical survey that is 'lofty, disinterested and sublime', and Boethius as a man who 'would have been remarkable in any age' but who 'in the age in which he lived … is utterly amazing' (Russell, 1961, pp. 368, 370). For C. S. Lewis, the *Consolation* was among the few works which had shaped his philosophy of life (Lewis, 1964).

In the last century, a medium-sized crater on Mercury was named Boethius, in a region of the planet (0.9 S, 73.3 W) which – appropriately but one assumes coincidentally – contains craters named after Dürer, who made a woodcut of the figure of Philosophy as she appears in Book I of the *Consolation,* and Raphael, who features Boethius in his famous painting *The School of Athens* (bottom left). One wonders whether those who named this crater were also aware that in the *Consolation* the god Mercury, though never named, appears as 'the winged Arcadian god' who intervenes in support of Odysseus during his wanderings after the fall of Troy.

Attracted by this reputation and posthumous fame, I finally got round to reading *The Consolation of Philosophy* a few years ago in a free translation available online, dated 1897, by H. R. James, one of the last of the ten English translations of the work to appear during the period c. 1600 – c. 1900 (Boethius, 1897). Although the core themes of the book came over loud and clear, I was put off by the 'olde englishe' style of the translation – 'in sooth', 'seest thou', 'that thou mayst not think', 'have ye no good', and so on – but, more seriously, left wondering how this work could have been written by someone supposedly a Christian and whether the proffered philosophical 'consolation' to someone under sentence of death was something that would conceivably console me were I ever to find myself in such a situation. It was only after reading more recently two excellent, but very different, modern translations by P. G. Walsh and David Slavitt that I realised how partial, even if understandable, my initial judgement had been (Boethius, 2008). It has left me feeling both how powerful the role of the translator is in shaping one's understanding of a work but at the same time very aware of the continuing limits to my understanding of the *Consolation* given the inaccessibility to me of much of its Latin.

WHO WAS BOETHIUS?

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480 – c. 524), as any Roman hearing those names would have been able to tell, was a member of a grand family of the old Roman aristocracy. He spent most of his life in Rome at a time when the city's authority had become a shadow of its former self. Many of the old institutions and titles, such as the senate and the consulship, remained but without their original powers. The last Roman Emperor of the West, Romulus Augustulus, had been dethroned in 476 by the army commander Odoacer, the first non-Roman ruler of Rome. A Roman emperor of the Eastern Empire based in Constantinople remained, with continuing pretensions to authority over the whole of the former empire. As a result, the locus of power in Italy was far from clear. The Eastern Emperor refused to accept Odoacer's legitimacy and sent the Ostrogothic leader Theoderic to unseat him. After Odoacer's final defeat and murder in 493, Theoderic took over in Italy as King of the Ostrogoths, establishing his capital at Ravenna, over two hundred miles from Rome.

None of these changes were as radical as they might seem. Theoderic was thoroughly Romanised, relied largely for his senior officials on Romans such as Boethius's father, whom he had inherited from Odoacer, and, like virtually everyone in Italy by this time, was a Christian. In Rome, despite the loss of power, life largely carried on as before. The traditional Roman secular schools continued well into the sixth century, educating the elite in ways that would have been familiar to their ancestors. Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Aristotle, and Plato were still read, as evidenced not least in Boethius's writings, and the intellectual life of the city, among both professional scholars and amateurs, remained active (Kirby, 1981, p. 50).

Boethius's father, who had been a praetor and consul, died when he was young and Boethius was brought up by an even grander family, marrying the daughter, Rusticiana, of his protector Symmachus, a highly educated man whom Boethius greatly revered. Boethius spent most of his adult life as a cultivated Roman gentleman reading, thinking, and writing, and doing so with some intensity judging by his output. In 510, at a young age for the role, he was elected consul, but he appears to have undertaken no further public roles until 522, when he accepted an appointment in Ravenna as Theoderic's *Magister Officiorum* (Master of Offices), in which post he was an intermediary between Theoderic and the other officials of the court. In this new situation, things soon began to go badly wrong. Maybe it was a result of Boethius's political inexperience; maybe in a time of tension between Theoderic, an Arian Christian, and a Catholic emperor in Constantinople, Theoderic suspected a Catholic Roman like Boethius of sympathising with the enemy; maybe it was Boethius's self-proclaimed championing of the victims of injustice and opposition to corruption on the part of ambitious 'hounds in the palace' that got up the noses of more established officials (Boethius, 1999b, p. 9).

Whatever the reason, tensions came to a head when a fellow Roman senator, Albinus, was accused by Theoderic's private secretary Cyprian of treasonable correspondence with Constantinople. Boethius defended Albinus and, by implication, the rest of the Senate, accusing Cyprian of making false charges. Theoderic took Cyprian's side, arresting Boethius and Albinus, probably executing Albinus almost immediately but confining Boethius at Pavia. Boethius's case was put to the Senate for trial, in the defendant's absence. Despite his defence of the Senate, Boethius's colleagues in Rome, perhaps under *force majeure,* found him guilty of the charges against him, an act of treachery by his fellow senators which particularly hurt him and

which figures in the lament about his fate, which he pours out in Book 1 of the *Consolation.* Whether or not he was under sentence of death at the time he wrote the book remains unclear (Boethius, 1999a, pp. xvi–xix, Book 1, Chapter 4; Marenbon, 2003, pp. 9–10; Moorhead, 2009, pp. 17–20; Shanzer, 1984, pp. 356, 365; Matthews, 1981, pp. 36–38).

It is also not clear when Boethius was put to death. It could have been in any of the years 524, 525, and 526. We also do not know in what conditions Boethius was imprisoned. The *Consolation* suggests that he was exiled and confined but does not specifically mention a prison. It is not certain, for example, whether he had access to books while writing the *Consolation.* He cannot have had access to the library mentioned in the text, whose walls were 'adorned with ivory and glass', and which one finds beautifully illustrated in a fifteenth-century manuscript held in the archives of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, but the close textual parallels between the *Consolation* and some Greek and Latin works suggest that he may have had access to some of them (Boethius, 1999a, Book 1, Chapter 4; Courcelle, 1967, plate 18.2). Finally, we do not know why Theoderic finally decided to kill him and in what manner he died. Relations between Theoderic and Constantinople appear to have continued to deteriorate following Boethius's arrest, with the Catholic Pope John I, a friend of Boethius, being kept in confinement on his return to Italy from a visit to the East, and Symmachus, Boethius's father-in-law, also being arrested. According to one tradition, Boethius had a cord twisted round his head so tightly it caused his eyeballs to protrude and was then beaten to death with a club, a form of execution formerly reserved for the lower classes. Another has him being killed by a thrust of a sword (Matthews, 1981, p. 15). As with so much about Boethius, one has to sift through the many stories that grew up around his name and in the end come to the conclusion that there are many things we simply do not know.

A medieval tradition has Boethius being buried in the crypt of a church in Pavia. An informal cult grew up in that locality under the name of St Severinus, a cult finally authorised by Pope Leo XIII in 1883 when Boethius, seen as a martyr, was beatified (Boethius, 1999a, pp. xxviii–cc; Albrecht, 1997, p. 1733; Summers, 2004, p. 13). Blessed Severinus Boethius is remembered in the Roman Catholic Church on 23rd October, which the Church seems to have decided was the date of his execution. It also seems to have decided that the year of his death was 524. That most learned of popes and the one whom one would most have expected to have read and appreciated the *Consolation,* Pope Benedict XVI, gave a General Audience in March 2008

in which he spoke at length, typically providing scholarly references to the text in the printed version of his speech, about the life and works of Boethius, seeing him – perhaps with the challenge facing contemporary multicultural societies in mind – as someone trying to reconcile Roman and Ostrogothic traditions, as well as a symbol of the unjustly imprisoned. The second half of his speech was about Cassiodorus, the Christian writer and educator who succeeded Boethius as Theoderic's Master of Offices and who seems to have been better than Boethius at keeping his head down in that role (as well as, one assumes, keeping quiet about his predecessor's fate), and whom Pope Benedict, looking at late antiquity through contemporary spectacles though not wholly inappropriately, also regarded as 'a model of cultural encounter' (Benedict XVI, 2008).

The uncertainties about Boethius's biography and the general lack of evidence about aspects of his times have made it easy for later writers to jump to conclusions and to shape Boethius in a variety of images to meet their own needs and priorities. Boethius has often been seen as a heroic figure trying to 'shore up the last vestiges of civilisation before the coming of an age of darkness', 'a man in splendid isolation, fighting against the engulfing forces of darkness and ignorance', even as a one man 'Boethian renaissance' (Kirby, 1981, pp. 55–57). This is misleading, not least because of the Romanising and Christianising of the 'barbarian' invaders that was taking place and because, specifically as far as Rome itself is concerned, evidence shows how the major classical texts continued to be widely studied there for many years after his death (Moorhead, 2009, p. 31; Cornelius, 2016, p. 10). Bertrand Russell's statement (quoted earlier) that the *Consolation* 'would have been remarkable in any age' but 'utterly amazing' in the world in which Boethius lived is based on the assumption that he was living in 'the Dark Ages'. The *Consolation* is arguably a great and sophisticated work, but it is not 'utterly amazing' that someone like Boethius – with his classical education, wealth, leisure, well-stocked library, and guardian who had edited a commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and written a history of Rome – should have produced it at the time when he did (Marenbon, 2003, p. 11).

As his belated beatification suggests, Boethius has also for centuries been seen as a martyr for Catholic Christianity, someone who defended orthodoxy against a tyrannical heretical ruler (Marenbon, 2003, p. 10; Summers, 2004, pp. 13–14). But there is no evidence that religious rather than political or personal considerations were an important element in his imprisonment and murder.

BOETHIUS'S OTHER WORKS

Except among a small number of philosophers, Boethius, since the latter part of the Middle Ages, has been best known, and sometimes only known, as the author of the *Consolation.* This was not always so. Boethius had two ambitions as a scholar and writer. The first, most important, and most ambitious was to translate into Latin the whole of Aristotle together with Plato's dialogues, write commentaries on these works, and in a treatise show how Plato and Aristotle could be brought into harmony. The initial focus of this grand plan was on logic, where Boethius translated all of Aristotle's logical works, wrote commentaries on some of these, translated or commented on some of the logical works of the third-century Neoplatonist Porphyry, wrote a commentary on a logical work of Cicero's, and produced a number of monographs of his own. He did not get round to translating any more of Aristotle or any of the works of Plato. The fact that he seems to have been diverted into aspects of logic, which were not part of his original plan, has led some to wonder how serious he was in this ambition. But there is no proof that he was not, in which case Theoderic's arbitrary decision to put a stop to the workings of this particularly rich and fruitful mind at the early age of forty-four may well have determined the intellectual life of Europe for the next thousand years, depriving it of many elements of Platonic thought, which would now have to wait until the Renaissance to be rediscovered (Marenbon, 2003, pp. 17–18).

Boethius's second ambition appears to have been to write a series of treatises on what he was the first to call the *quadrivium,* the group of mathematical subjects – arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy – widely grouped together in the ancient world and an essential part of university curricula in the Middle Ages and beyond (Marenbon, 2003, p. 14). All four subjects seem to have been covered, although only copies of *De Arithmetica* (*On Arithmetic*) with its dedication to Symmachus and fragments of the *De Institutione Musica* (*The Principles of Music*) have survived, both of which were used throughout the Middle Ages (the well-informed fox in Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale* referring to Boethius's musical skills eight centuries later, as if they were still common knowledge) (Benson, 1987, p. 259, lines 3293–3294).

In the *Consolation,* the female figure of Philosophy who is Boethius's interlocutor wears a robe embroidered with a ladder between the neck and the hem. At the top of the ladder is the Greek letter theta (Θ), associated with theoretical knowledge, and at the bottom, the letter pi (Π), associated with knowledge

derived from practical experience (Wetherbee, 2009, p. 280). Although the number of rungs on the ladder is not specified, some illustrators of manuscripts of the *Consolation* show it with seven rungs representing the seven liberal arts, the four arts of the *quadrivium,* and the three preliminary studies of grammar, logic (or dialectic), and rhetoric, known later in the Middle Ages as the *trivium.* Other drawings in manuscripts show Philosophy, as part of her 'cure' for Boethius's affliction, introducing him to seven female figures identified as the muses representing the seven liberal arts (Courcelle, 1967, plates 25, 26.2, 54.1, 54.2, 56, 57).

As well as these excursions into the *quadrivium,* Boethius also produced five short theological treatises, or *Opuscula Sacra.* It was only after the final attribution of these works to Boethius in the last part of the nineteenth century that doubts as to whether Boethius had really been a Catholic Christian could finally be put to rest (Shanzer, 2009, pp. 240–241).

The impact of these 'other works' by Boethius was massive, following their reappearance in the early ninth century during the Carolingian Renaissance. From that century onwards, until well into the twelfth century, Boethius's writings on logic were the basis for most further work in this area by medieval philosophers. It was Boethius who gave logic such prominence in medieval philosophy. It was Boethius who established the Latin philosophical vocabulary subsequently used during the many centuries in which virtually all philosophical works were written in that language. It was Boethius who gave medieval philosophers access to Aristotle and, to a limited extent, to Plato, at a time when many of these philosophers' works were no longer available and knowledge of Greek had become a rare commodity (Marenbon, 2009, p. 6; Erismann, 2009, pp. 155–156, 163–164; Cameron, 2009, p. 96).

Although much of Boethius's *oeuvre* was unoriginal and his main achievement, outside the *Consolation,* was as a conduit through which ancient ideas passed to the Middle Ages, the impact of the various emphases in his work – its 'sober Aristotelian tone', recurring Neoplatonic influences, and the subsidiary importance of biblical texts – helped to give a distinctively Boethian shape to medieval philosophy (Marenbon, 2009, pp. 2, 4; 2003, p. 42). His theological works, an essential reference text for medieval philosophers and theologians, have also been seen as 'rais(ing) theology to a new level of sophistication', showing the relevance to theology of Aristotelian logic and Neoplatonism, and establishing a tradition of 'rational theology' in which issues such as the Trinity were able to be explored analytically, with biblical texts relegated to a secondary role (Marenbon, 2009, pp. 6–7; Bradshaw,

2009, p. 125; Erismann, 2009, pp. 157, 163). It is for all these reasons that R. W. Chambers rightly described Boethius as 'one of the three founders of the Middle Ages', alongside St Benedict and Cassiodorus (Gibson, 1981, p. vii).

But it is the *Consolation* by which Boethius is now remembered, whose influence went way beyond the ranks of medieval philosophers and whose reputation rarely flagged from the ninth century onwards.

WHAT KIND OF A WORK IS THE CONSOLATION?

> I was writing this in a silence broken only by the scratchings of my quill … when there was a presence of which I gradually became aware looming over my head, the figure of a woman whose look filled me with awe. Her burning gaze was indescribably penetrating unlike that of anyone I have ever met, and while her complexion was as fresh and glowing as that of a girl, I realised that she was ancient and that nobody would mistake her for a creature of our time.
>
> – BOETHIUS (2008, Book I, i)

The *Consolation* is narrated by Boethius (author) in the first person and features two characters: Boethius (as character in the story) and a supernatural person, Philosophy, whose apparition is described above. Although there are echoes of the dream and vision narratives common in ancient and medieval literature, this apparition is more of an epiphany (Shanzer, 2009, p. 231). Philosophy's role in the emerging dialogue between the two characters is to console and to educate Boethius who, exiled and confined, begins with a long lament about his misfortunes, contrasting his past happiness with his current despair. Philosophy is also the doctor or nurse who tries out the remedies that will enable him to put his misfortunes in perspective, stop whingeing, remind himself of the ends of the universe, the nature of true happiness and the purpose of his life, and focus his mind on preparing his soul for its return to its origins in God. In this way, Boethius is reconciled to his present condition and possible future fate. The book concludes with an examination of the problem of the existence of free will in a world governed by an all-powerful and all-seeing deity (Chadwick, 1981, p. 11; Crabbe, 1981, p. 238).

As well as fitting into a literary tradition of religious revelation, the *Consolation* is thus also each of the following: a *protreptic,* an ancient Greek term for a work designed to persuade or instruct and to encourage someone to

change their way of life; a philosophical dialogue, embracing a range of topics in ethics, metaphysics, and theology; and a *consolatio,* a work of consolation (Shanzer, 1984, pp. 362–366; Cornelius, 2016, p. 270).

As a close reader of Plato, someone much influenced by the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry, and a student of Cicero, Boethius was steeped in the Greco-Roman tradition of philosophical dialogue. Allusions and direct references to Platonic dialogues recur throughout the book, reaching a climax in the great poem at its mid-point, a hymn of praise to the Platonic God, which draws largely on Plato's *Timaeus* (Boethius 1999a, III, 9; Albrecht, 1997, pp. 1713–1715; Baldwin, 1994, p. 23). The shadow of Socrates is also never far away, both as the founding practitioner of the philosophical dialogue and as someone whose fate – as the victim of unjust accusers – foreshadows that of Boethius.

As a *consolatio,* the *Consolation* is an example of a genre which in the ancient world took many forms, most frequently involving an expression of sympathy for those grieving over the loss of a loved one with the therapeutic intent to help them manage or overcome their grief. Although Boethius did not call his work a *consolatio* and does not use the word in the text, and although the object and the nature of the consolation are unusual, the *Consolation* has strong claims to be an example of this genre. It is a self-consolation in which Boethius, the author, consoles himself by showing how Philosophy consoles his textual namesake. The latter is being consoled essentially for philosophical reasons and above all because of his failure to understand why it is that the wicked thrive while someone like himself, who always tried to act justly, should suffer. Philosophy consoles Boethius by showing how the worldly goods that he enjoyed and has now lost are false goods and that the perfect good resides in God, who is identical with happiness. This happiness must be sought by introspection.

The more rigorous philosophical dialogues in the last two books similarly 'console' in the sense that, in Book IV, they show how virtue always achieves its end of the good while vice always fails (about which neither Boethius, at least initially, nor this author are wholly convinced) and, in Book V, reassure Boethius, using an argument based on the nature of God's eternity, that freedom of the will is compatible with divine Providence. Consolation also comes from the very act of doing philosophy, exercising one's mind and showing how, by doing so, one can change one's perception of the world in ways independent of one's circumstances (Moorhead, 2009, p. 24; Donato, 2012).

As if identifying the *Consolation* as *protreptic,* educational text, *consolatio,* and Platonic philosophical dialogue were not enough, some critics have

also pointed out its resemblances with *satura Menippea* (Menippean satire), a comic, ironic, and satirical Greco-Roman genre that involves parodying people and beliefs and has had a long influence into modern times (with Rabelais and Swift among its later proponents). One can see the attraction of such an identification for postmodernist critics looking for different levels of meaning, ambiguity, and subversion; yet the mostly very serious tone of the *Consolation* and the inherent tragedy of a narrator and textual alter ego with a menacing and uncertain fate hanging over him make it seem improbable that the work is a parody of a *consolatio* or even that, as the leading Boethius expert John Marenbon has suggested, Boethius is deliberately giving Philosophy weak arguments as a way of shaping our overall response to the work (Shanzer, 2009, pp. 233–234, 243; Albrecht, 1997, p. 1713; Boethius, 1996a, pp. xxxviii–xli; Marenbon, 2003, pp. 155, 159–163).

One of the features of the *Consolation* which has linked it to Menippean satire is its *prosimetric* form, with alternating prose (*prosa*) and verse (*metrum*). All the chapters in Book I begin with a verse and all chapters in Books II to V end with one, with the exception of the final chapter of Book V. The verses vary in length and are in so many different metrical forms that, in the words of their modern translator P. G. Walsh, 'the chief impression made upon the reader … is Boethius' desire to demonstrate his facility with all the metres common in Roman antiquity'. The creative variations in metre achieved by Boethius lead one critic to the conclusion that he must have had much of Latin poetry by heart, one reason perhaps why he was able to craft such a work in a condition of imprisonment (Boethius, 1999a, p. xlii; Crabbe, 1981, p. 241). It is in these 39 poems that Boethius shows his huge knowledge of and debt to the major Latin poets from the opening lines of the first poem, with its Virgilian echoes, onwards:

> Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi,
> Flebilis heu maestos coger inire modos.
> Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda Camenae
> Et ueris elegi fletibus ora rigant.
>
> I who with zest penned songs in happier days,
> Must now with grief embark on somber lays.
> Sad verses flood my cheeks with tears unfeigned;
> The Muses who inspire me are blood-stained. (Boethius, 1999a, p. 3)

Most of the poems, unlike this opening one, are spoken by Philosophy and illustrate in a new way the meaning of the prose section which they precede. It is through the verses that Boethius is also able, in Books III and IV, to bring into the work some of the most important legends of antiquity and to show their relevance to his themes: Orpheus and Eurydice, illustrating the danger of not keeping one's eyes on things above; the encounter of Odysseus and companions with Circe as a symbol of how one may carelessly turn away from one's true being; Odysseus's outwitting of Polyphemus and the labours of Hercules as examples of how men can shape their own fortunes.

> Alas, alas! At the very
> verge of the dark kingdom,
> Orpheus had his moment
> of doubt, and turned and saw,
> and lost the woman forever.
> This old and familiar tale
> is yours, as you make your ascent
> leading your mind to the light,
> for if, in a moment of weakness,
> you should look back on the darkness,
> the excellence you have achieved
> you will lose, looking back, looking down. (Boethius, 2008, p. 105)

At the beginning of the book, Philosophy chases away the poetic muses whom she finds at Boethius's bedside, dismissing them, in the way that Plato banned the arts from his ideal city, as creatures who 'have no cures for what ails him' and 'will only make his condition worse', inflame 'intemperate passions', and deprive him of 'the fruits of reason' (Boethius, 2008, p. 4; Tate, 2016, pp. 26–28). Despite this, the verses, as well as supporting the arguments in the prose sections, also target the reader's emotions and provide a gentler 'medicine' for Boethius's ills, helping him to concentrate better when he and Philosophy continue their reasoning. As an educational text, in which a body of wisdom is being transmitted both to the main character (Boethius) and to the reader, cognitive and affective approaches are both being used (Zim, 2014, pp. 31, 35). The message seems to be that, despite Plato, philosophy and poetry are able to coexist, but only perhaps when the latter is supporting the former (Crabbe, 1981, pp. 250–251).

The poems in the *Consolation,* over the centuries, have particularly appealed to readers and, at different times, have been set to music. Chants based on Boethian poems date back to the Carolingian monasteries of the ninth century. One of the few non-liturgical Latin songs that has survived in musical notation from Anglo-Saxon times in England, from St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury and now in the Bodleian Library, is based on Boethius's poem *Bella bis quinis* (Page, 1981, pp. 306–311).[19]

The eclectic nature of the *Consolation* was probably one reason for its huge popularity in the Middle Ages, at a time when antiquity had such high status and many other classical writers were so difficult to get hold of. It was an attractively balanced combination of prose and verse, a highly useful compendium of poetry in all the main classical metres, an introduction to some of the major topics in Greco-Roman philosophy, a succinct poetic summary of a few of the main myths of ancient Greece, a collection of references to Roman history, an example of how one applies logical methods to ethics, metaphysics and theology, and a personal testimony from someone whose other works many scholars were reading and with whom it was easy to identify (Cornelius, 2016, p. 270; Copeland, 2016, p. 10).

IS THE CONSOLATION A CHRISTIAN WORK AND HOW CHRISTIAN WAS BOETHIUS?

Another reason for the medieval interest in, and curiosity about, the *Consolation* was the uncertainty about its relationship with Christianity. There were some who clearly had major reservations about it because of its complete failure to make any reference to Jesus Christ, the Creation, the Bible, or the Church and, even more seriously, because of Philosophy's espousal of Platonic beliefs such as the pre-existence of the soul and the idea that recollections of this previous state are possible. The text is resolutely pagan in the sense that all its references are to pagan Greece and Rome and to pagan authors (and, above all, to the pagan Plato). Some, such as Dante and Chaucer, were clearly hugely attracted to it but left uncertain about the relationship between Boethius's Neoplatonic world vision and his Platonic God, on the one hand, and the Christian world of original sin, incarnation, resurrection, and salvation,

[19] A recording by the Ensemble Cantilena Antiqua of a Carolingian setting of *Bella bis quinis,* marvellously evocative of a dead world, is available.

on the other. Some, following St Augustine in the previous century, who felt fortified in his Christian faith by his study of the Neoplatonists, did not see any contradiction between the two systems and, indeed, saw ways in which Christianity was strengthened by such an alliance. Some of these tried very hard, sometimes too hard, to find Christian references within the text or, more successfully, interpreted pagan references figuratively. For some incipient humanists, on the other hand, it may have been a liberating glimpse of a world beyond Christianity (Courcelle, 1967, pp. 338, 340).

There are now few doubts as to whether Boethius was a Christian given that the *Consolation* is a book about someone known to be a Christian at a time when everyone else was a Christian and that nothing is indicated in the dialogue with Philosophy that Boethius is anything other than one. Indeed, even though Philosophy takes up positions that sit uneasily with Christianity, nothing that the textual Boethian character says is at all incompatible with Christianity. It is not unreasonable for Danuta Shanzer to speculate as to whether there might have been some kind of failure of faith, or even apostasy, on the part of Boethius (Shanzer, 2009, p. 243). After all, it is certainly puzzling that, when one's whole world has fallen apart and one faces the possibility of being put to death, and if one is a Christian, that one's first thought is to deepen one's intellectual perception of the true order and proportion of the universe rather than falling into the loving arms of Jesus or worrying about one's chances of salvation. As someone brought up as a Christian, that was certainly my reaction coming to the *Consolation* for the first time. However, nothing specific leads one to assume that Boethius might not have been a Christian, even if we have not much indication of what kind of Christian he might have been.

At the very least, it seems reasonable to accept Henry Chadwick's view that 'the *Consolation* is a work written by a Platonist who is also a Christian, but it is not a Christian work' (Chadwick, 1981, p. 249). John Marenbon seems to have come to a similar conclusion in more recent discussion of the work when arguing that Boethius 'respected the Platonic tradition in its own integrity' without seeing it either as a possible substitute for Christianity or as something that Christianity had to embrace. The only difference between the two positions is that Marenbon leaves open the question of the extent to which Boethius *enthusiastically embraced* the Platonic tradition rather than just respecting it. Marenbon's much lengthier discussion of the *Consolation* in an earlier book suggested that Boethius may have wished his readers (all of whom would be Christians) to come away from the book with reservations

about the Platonic philosophical tradition, as illustrated through the words of Philosophy, as a result of incoherences in some of Philosophy's arguments that he had placed there *intentionally* for this purpose. Whether this is the early twenty-first century giving its own shape to the *Consolation,* to fit in with its own preference for irony and complexity, as early medieval, late medieval, and Renaissance commentators also shaped it to fit in with their own very different perspectives, remains an open question (Marenbon, 2009, p. 8; 2003, pp. 154–159).

HOW THE CONSOLATION WAS READ AND USED IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The *Consolation* seems to have been largely unknown until the end of the eighth century. The first manuscript copies are to be found in the ninth century. As a result, it was always seen as a work from 'antiquity' and never (at least to our knowledge) as a contemporary or near-contemporary text. Though revered as 'ancient', it came across as less remote than many other classical texts, not least as the work of a fellow Christian whose Christian 'martyrdom', however erroneous, quickly came to be associated with the work. As such, and because of its many accessible elements, the *Consolation,* in the words of one critic, became the 'familiar face of an otherwise more recondite classicism' (Copeland, 2016, p. 10).

It was possibly the English scholar, writer, and teacher Alcuin (another 'Blessed') (c. 735–804) who was responsible for bringing the *Consolation* to the attention of the world at the end of the eighth century. It looks as if the Benedictine abbey of Fleury in France acquired a copy from the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino in Italy and, as one of the most important *scriptoria* (rooms for copying manuscripts) of its time, was able to disseminate it from there (Papahagi, 2009). As a major figure in the Carolingian Renaissance and counsellor of the Emperor Charlemagne Alcuin, having acquired a copy and clearly been impressed by it, was in a strong position to encourage this process. He did his best to 'Christianise' Boethius, stressing the compatibility of his teachings with Christianity and picking up major themes such as the benefits of philosophical study and the vanity of worldly goods. As an adviser to Charlemagne, in his letters to the Emperor, he draws on Boethius's Platonic thoughts on good government and the need for rulers to be philosopher kings. The emphasis in the *Consolation* on Boethius's

noble motives for taking up office and high principles within it was to be long associated with advice to rulers on the principles of wise statesmanship (Courcelle, 1967, pp. 33, 47, 60, 335; Marenbon, 2003, p. 173; Cornelius, 2016, p. 270; Wetherbee, 2009, p. 279; Nauta, 2009, p. 257).

The *Consolation,* in the form of a parchment codex, soon came to be widely read within the monasteries and cathedral schools of the Carolingian Empire. Glossed versions and commentaries began to be produced, with twelve surviving from Carolingian times. In England, St Dunstan can be found glossing a copy at Glastonbury Abbey in the mid-tenth century. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, there were no periods in which the *Consolation* disappeared from use. Even in those eras when no new commentaries were written, old manuscripts continued to be copied (England's pre-eminent library, that of the cathedral priory of Christ Church at Canterbury, possessed seven copies of the *Consolation* when catalogued c. 1180). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the standard commentary was by William of Conches, French philosopher and tutor to the future King Henry II of England. William's opinion was that 'there is nothing superfluous in such a perfect work as the *Consolation* written by such a perfect philosopher as Boethius' (Nauta, 2009, p. 255). Whether or not he used the *Consolation* with his royal charge – who turned into a very able Latin-speaking ruler, but one more likely to be associated with Machiavelli's *The Prince* than with Plato's *Republic* – is not known. It would be surprising if he did not, both because of his own high opinion of Boethius and the widespread use of the *Consolation* in schools at that time. Further commentaries followed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the most widely disseminated one again being a version produced at the beginning of the fourteenth century by another scholar associated with England, the Dominican William Trevet. A few years later, a glossed version was also produced by William Wheteley for use by the pupils of his grammar school in Lincoln (Courcelle, 1967, p. 336; Cornelius, 2016, pp. 270–271, 279; Willoughby, 2016, p. 100; Nauta, 2009, p. 268).

The *Consolation* indeed seems to have been one of the texts most widely used in schools throughout the whole of the Middle Ages. In Italy, it was by far 'the most popular school author' from the thirteenth century up to the middle of the fifteenth. There are more extant manuscripts of the *Consolation* prepared for school use in Italy dating from this period than there are copies of *all* the works of any one other Latin author. The educational value of the *Consolation* – as a repository of examples of dialectical exercises, models for prose and verse composition, and mythological, historical, geographical, and

scientific information – has already been mentioned. In the early Middle Ages, at least in Italy, it was also used in schools as an introduction to philosophy and theology. This seems to have largely ceased in Italy by the thirteenth century following the creation of universities, which increasingly monopolised these areas of study, leaving schools with the role of ensuring simply that pupils were well grounded in all aspects of the Latin language. The *Consolation* continued to be used in schools and, indeed, used more widely than before, but also used more narrowly for philological and general knowledge purposes and not as an introduction to moral philosophy (Black, 2001, pp. 9, 183, 198, 222, 271, 304, 328–329; Beaumont, 1981).

It is quite possible, therefore, that large numbers of pupils, as with the case of Cicero's *On Duties,* spent a large amount of time studying *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in their school rooms without picking up a great deal about the nature of the work as a whole (in the same way as the current author at school studied in great detail Book I of the *Aeneid* without learning much about the wider story of which it was a part). There are indications, however, that schools in France and northern Europe were rather more likely to retain a philosophical emphasis in the study of the work than those in Italy (Black, 2001, pp. 28, 329).

In universities, the *Consolation* was mostly not part of the formal curriculum, but evidence suggests that many copies were available, that it was widely read by students, and that this state of affairs continued well into the fifteenth century, not just in Western Europe but also in centres of learning such as Prague and Vienna (Palmer, 1981, pp. 380–381).

What was distinctive about the *Consolation,* however, was the extent to which, in addition to all these Latin editions and commentaries, the work was also during the Middle Ages available in a range of vernaculars. Until the late fourteenth century, relatively few Latin works by classical authors were translated into the vernacular for the simple reason that Latin was the first language of the upper classes and of the Church. The *Consolation* was the exception.

The first vernacular translation, and perhaps both the most famous and the most extraordinary, was into Old English at the end of the ninth century and, as surviving manuscripts claim, traditionally assumed to be by King Alfred himself as part of his project to make available to non-Latin speakers (at a time when most Englishmen fell into this category) texts that were 'needful'. These texts dealt with topics such as the need for good government, the nature of the universe, the existence and nature of God, and the immortality of the

soul. Alfred saw the *Consolation* as an aid in adversity, his biographer Asser reporting that he suffered from 'an unknown malady'. Unknown personal problems aside, one can see the attraction of the *Consolation* at a time when Wessex was besieged and threatened by the Danish incursions and thus the need for a text that, as well as being consolatory, was also, because of its message about the virtuous life, a stimulus to action (Medcalf, 2008, p. 366; Boethius, 1999a, pp. xlv–xlvi).

Unfortunately, because one is attracted to the idea of a battling king struggling to uphold civilisation against heavy odds and personally working by candlelight on the translation of a difficult text, the Dictionary of National Biography's (and most earlier scholars') attribution of authorship to Alfred has recently been called into question. Unlike the claim that Alfred translated Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis,* the evidence for him translating the *Consolation* is both late and partial. In addition, the Anglo-Saxon version of the *Consolation* is a complex text, incorporating glosses, commentaries, and additional material, and one that would have hugely challenged, even with help, someone who only learned Latin at the age of 39 and who died at the age of c. 50 after spending the last few years of his life constantly threatened by Danish incursions. It is even argued that a mid-tenth-century date for the work may be more likely (Godden, 2007). The arguments against Alfred's authorship, though very powerful, are not conclusive, so the image of Alfred in the embattled Kingdom of Wessex communing night after night with the shade of Boethius in his Pavia prison may therefore be with us for some time yet.

'The Old English Boethius' exists in two versions: one in prose and verse and the other a translation of the poems into Old English alliterative verse. The prose version is a very free translation accompanied by glosses and a range of additional material and beginning with a short and highly fictional life of Boethius, which painted him as a martyr and defender of Catholic Christianity. Some major philosophical passages were omitted and the text Christianised, with references to Christ, angels, and Satan being inserted and the figure of Philosophy turned into one representing 'heavenly' Wisdom. The work has been described as one of 'wonder and worship' rather than one of philosophy (Medcalf, 2008, p. 366). Its effect was to solidify features of the Boethius legend – the prisoner, the Christian martyr, the humble sufferer, the defender of Roman traditions, the champion of probity and good government – which were henceforth associated with him and with the *Consolation* throughout succeeding centuries. 'The Old English Boethius' continued to circulate until

the twelfth century and was known as late as the fourteenth when Nicholas Trevet referred to it in producing his Latin commentary on the Latin text (Wetherbee, 2009, p. 280). No further English translations were to follow until the prose translation of Chaucer in c. 1380 and what turned out to be the more widely disseminated metrical version of John Walton, based on Chaucer's prose version, in 1410. In the twelfth century, medieval England's greatest Latinist historian, William of Malmesbury, had declared as laughable the very idea that one might translate the *Consolation* into English (Medcalf, 2008, p. 372; Cornelius, 2016, pp. 285–286).

France, in this respect, was quicker off the mark. An adapted version in Provençal, more concerned about the alleged details of Boethius's death, appeared at the beginning of the eleventh century. This was followed by twelve translations into French in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, one (c. 1300) by Jean de Meun, the part-author of the *Roman de la rose* and one of France's greatest medieval authors. One highly creative early fourteenth-century version, in which the mythological references were expanded and Old Testament material inserted, was written in the Picard dialect (Wetherbee, 2009, pp. 280–281; Marenbon, 2003, 179–180; Summers, 2004, p. 14; Elliott, 2016, Chapter 1).

In German, the first translation, into Old High German, was in the tenth century by a Benedictine monk, Notker, at the Abbey of St Gall (now Switzerland), and made available in manuscript as a bilingual edition (Kaylor, 2015, p. 122). Later German versions followed in the fifteenth century. Before the end of the Middle Ages, there had also been three or four translations into Spanish and Catalan (all before 1400), some fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian translations, and translations into Dutch, Greek, and Hebrew. It also became more common as the Middle Ages advanced for Latin texts of the *Consolation* to be provided with vernacular glosses or complete vernacular translations, with the vernacular parts acting as an aid to the reader's understanding of what was still assumed to be the prime text (Palmer, 1981, p. 366).

The greater accessibility of the *Consolation* in the later Middle Ages coincided with and was stimulated by the greater use of the vernacular among the higher ranks of society in many parts of Europe. As well as royalty, monks, clerics, university teachers, schoolmasters, professionals (such as doctors, lawyers, and town clerks), and male members of the nobility, the *Consolation* was also increasingly available to female members of the nobility and to educated people of other classes. As Elizabeth Elliott has shown in *Remembering Boethius,* a study of the reception of the *Consolation* in late medieval

France and England, there was a wide knowledge of the work in noble and royal circles, making its use a signifier of key aspects of aristocratic identity. The *Consolation* was seen as an educational text directed at an aristocracy whose role as guarantors of the social order required them to cultivate their minds, develop their ethical character, control their appetites, and assume their responsibilities towards the wider community. Accessibility was further improved by the forty-three printed editions which appeared, mostly north of the Alps, during the second half of the fifteenth century following the invention of printing. The first printed edition in English, in 1525, the work of a Benedictine monk of Tavistock Abbey, was produced, interestingly, for a woman: Elizabeth Berkeley, daughter and heir of Lord Thomas Berkeley of Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire. Berkeley Castle was an appropriate place in which to be reading the work of another prisoner associated, as it always has been, with the appalling circumstances of the murder there of Edward II in 1327 (Marenbon, 2003, pp. 179–180; Wetherbee, 2009, p. 279; Nauta, 2009, p. 255; Albrecht, 1997, p. 1732; Black, 2001, p. 271; Elliott, 2016; Minnis, 1981, p. 343).[20] Considerable variations will have existed between these versions, sometimes as great as those between manuscript copies, given the way in which early print books are full of inaccuracies with proofread and un-proofread sheets often used indiscriminately. The idea that the invention of printing stabilised texts, allowing large numbers of people to be reading exactly the same version simultaneously, proves illusory on close scrutiny, at least at this early stage (Orgel, 2015, pp. 9–10).

DANTE, JEAN DE MEUN, CHAUCER, AND THE CONSOLATION

Not the least part of Boethius's impact during the Middle Ages was the influence he had on three of its greatest writers: Dante (c. 1265–1321), Jean de Meun (c. 1240–1305), and Chaucer (c. 1343–1400).

The influence of the *Consolation* on Dante's writings is all-pervasive from *La Vita Nuova* (1295) onwards, with over thirty direct references to Boethius having been located (Wetherbee, 2009, p. 298; Marenbon, 2003, p. 180; Highet,

[20] Edward II, having been defeated by a baronial rebellion supported by his French wife, was deposed, imprisoned, and murdered, allegedly by a red hot poker inserted into his anus.

1949, p. 79). As well as using the prosimetric form for both *La Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio* and using a Lady Philosophy figure in the latter work, Dante is attracted by Boethius's philosophical positions with regard to ethics, the role of Fortune, and the question of free will. As someone under sentence of death and exiled from his native city for the last twenty years of his life, there is also clearly a sense of fraternity with a sixth-century predecessor in a similar predicament. The *Consolation* is reflected in the different volumes of *La Divina Commedia*: in its references to Fortune in Canto VII of the *Inferno* and to freedom of will in Cantos XVI and XVIII of *Purgatorio* and Canto V of *Paradiso,* and in the whole cosmology of *Paradiso.* In Canto X of *Paradiso,* Boethius is to be found in pride of place in the Circle of the Sun (allocated to theologians) alongside other great names such as Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Peter Lombard, Isidore of Seville, and the Venerable Bede:

> Wrapped in the vision of all good, rejoices
> the sainted soul who makes most manifest
> the world's deceit to one who reads him well.
> The body that was torn from him below
> Cieldauro[21] now possesses; to this peace
> he came from exile and from martyrdom. (Dante Alighieri, 1984, pp. 122–123)

Jean de Meun was the author of the second part of the hugely influential *Roman de la rose* (1270s), which, as with Dante's writings, reflects a careful reading of the *Consolation.* Previously regarded by C. S. Lewis and others as 'an awkward and bewildering Gothic embarrassment', the *Roman de la rose* has more recently attracted the attention of large numbers of scholars who are finding in it all those elements of paradox, ludic irony, and sexual indeterminacy about which they are much more interested in writing (Morton, 2015). This has helped to throw light on Jean de Meun's response to the *Consolation.* Boethian themes, such as the role of Fortune, the goods of this world compared with the goods that do not perish, and the issue of divine prescience and free will, figure prominently but are often treated very differently, with the culmination of the book being not a turning of one's back on the things of this world but the final uniting with the desired object, in this case, the rose (the lady). Jean de Meun also produced his own translation of Boethius,

[21] The Church of St Peter in Ciel d'Oro ('ceiling of gold') in Pavia where Boethius is supposedly buried.

Livres de confort de philosophie (c. 1300), dedicated to Philip IV of France (Phillipe le Bel) in a preface which stressed its kinship with other works in the 'mirrors for princes' genre, whose purpose was giving advice to rulers.

Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation,* known as *Boece,* was done with Jean de Meun's French version at hand, alongside the Latin text and Latin glosses. Chaucer was also familiar with Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose,* which he had begun to translate early in his career, drawing on it in *The Monk's Tale,* written before he translated Boethius, as an indirect source through which to access some of the stories in the *Consolation.* Unlike many other translations of the *Consolation,* Chaucer's prose version both sticks closely to the original and is complete.

Chaucer also wrote five lyrics, often known as the 'Boethian lyrics', on philosophical or ethical themes taken from the *Consolation*: the need to defy Fortune through achieving *suffisaunce,* the contrast between civilisation with its false promises and life in simpler times, the primacy of *vertu* and *trouthe,* the importance of self-discipline and *stedfastnesse* (Benson, 1987, pp. 634–635, 650–654; Boethius, 1999a, p. xlvii). There are similarly strong echoes of the *Consolation* in *The Wife of Bath's Tale,* with its emphasis on the contrast between true worthiness and the superficial trappings of worldly success, and in which *Boece* is quoted as an authority.

One Boethian theme that preoccupied Chaucer was the relationship between Providence, Fate (or Fortune), and free will. As with other medieval writers, the *Consolation* was the starting point from which this issue was discussed. Philosophy's message was that Providence is the divine reason which orders the world, while Fate (or Fortune) is the process by which the will of Providence is carried into effect; Fortune is fickle and not to be relied upon, but God orders all for the best, and, despite God's omniscience, men are responsible for their actions, if not for their fate. Philosophy also admits that there is much about this that men do not fully understand.

Chaucer's treatment of these issues varies from one work to another, highlighting the ambiguities in Philosophy's account, which, as some scholars have suggested, Boethius himself may also have been aware of and trying to draw to our attention (Marenbon, 2003, pp. 143–145, 158–159). In *The Monk's Tale,* Chaucer gives us a list of people from history, legend, and mythology who have been tossed around on the wheel of Fortune but without any sense that behind all this some divine ordering of things is at work. In the ballade *Fortune,* by contrast, Fortune is seen as an executrix of God's will and Socrates is brought in as an example of someone able to rise above it. In *The*

Nun's Priest's Tale, the narrator treats the matter humorously, speculating as to whether the near-death experience of the cock Chauntecleer in his encounter with the wily fox at 9.00 a.m. on Friday 3rd May was fore-ordained by God and, if so, whether this constituted a case of 'simple' or 'conditional' necessity. These are matters that lead to 'greet altercaioun' in the schools, says the poor nun's priest, but unlike 'Boece', he adds, 'I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren' ('I am quite unable to make any sense of it') (Benson, 1987, p. 258, lines 3230–3251).

Issues of free will and Providence are most fully developed in *Troilus and Criseyde,* written around the same time in the 1380s that Chaucer translated the *Consolation,* and in *The Knight's Tale.* Troilus's lengthy dissertation on free will and predestination in Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde* follows very closely the textual Boethius's analysis of the same issues in Book V of the *Consolation.* Both Troilus and the textual Boethius fail to see any way round the conclusion that free will is incompatible with divine foreknowledge. One is unable to affect one's fate, prayer is pointless, blame and merit cease to have meaning, and, in Troilus's case, if he and Criseyde are foreordained not to be united, there is nothing anyone can do about it.

Boethius (author) and Chaucer both dissociate themselves from this negative conclusion. In Boethius's case, in the remaining three chapters of the *Consolation,* Philosophy argues that, being eternal, God's knowledge exists only in the present, not in the future or the past, and although some future events may happen by necessity, not all are predetermined, and that therefore free will still exists. The *Consolation* concludes with Philosophy urging the textual Boethius and, by implication, readers to 'avoid vices, cultivate the virtues, raise your minds to righteous hopes, pour out your humble prayers to heaven' and to do so *because* there is free will and *because* one's actions and prayers may therefore help to shape the course of undetermined future events (Boethius, 1999a, Book V, Chapter 6, p. 114). In *Troilus and Criseyde,* Chaucer similarly concludes Troilus's declamation by having him offer up a prayer despite his recent arguments having rendered prayers invalid in a world in which all is pre-ordained. He also mirrors the *Consolation* by ending the final book of *Troilus and Criseyde* with his own prayer to a personal God (Benson, 1987, pp. 552 [lines 1081–1082], 585 [lines 1863–1869]; Murton, 2015).

In other respects, in *Troilus and Criseyde,* Chaucer distances himself from the *Consolation.* His Christianity is more overt, concluding a story full of references to pagan gods with a prayer to Jesus and the Trinity. He also adapts Boethius's poem about the Love that orders the universe to show how the kind of love felt by Troilus and Criseyde can exist in harmony with the

greater cosmic love and not be dismissed as simply the passing pleasure of an inferior world (Benson, 1987, pp. 536–537, lines 1744–1771).

In *The Knight's Tale,* Chaucer also draws heavily on the *Consolation* and on Boethian cosmology and general wisdom. Theseus's concluding speech discusses the First Mover and Cause of the world, the chain of Love which binds the universe, divine Providence, the mutability of this world, and the need for acceptance of the transitoriness of life. Where Theseus is made to disagree with the *Consolation* is in his confidence in the value of earthly fame. Life may be fleeting, but this world is not so unimportant in the grand scheme of things that one's 'goode name' and 'worthy fame' are not worth struggling for (Benson, 1987, pp. 65–66, lines 2982–3066). Finally, the influence of Boethian ethical wisdom is also apparent in *The Wife of Bath's Tale,* which picks up themes from Book III of the *Consolation* in stressing that true happiness exists independently of status, wealth, and physical looks and that truth and the good lie within us and not in these externalities.

Although the literary influence of the *Consolation* in the later Middle Ages is best known through the writings of Dante, Jean de Meun, and Chaucer, these were by no means the only writers during this period whose works were shaped by it. The late thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries were a time when the Boethian influence was at its height. In Italy, Petrarch (1304–1374) had an intimate knowledge of the *Consolation* and Boccaccio (1313–1375) drew on it in the *Filocolo* and the *Filistrato,* the latter the initial inspiration for Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde.* In France, Jean de Meun was far from the only author under its influence. Guillaume de Machaut (1300–1377) wrote his own 'consolation' – *Confort d'ami,* addressed to his captive patron Charles of Navarre – as well as two other works full of Boethian allusions. Jean Froissart (1337–1405), best known for his *Chronicles,* similarly addressed an imprisoned patron with a work, *La prison amoureuse,* inspired by the *Consolation.*

In England, Chaucer's contemporary and friend John Gower (1330–1408), the last major writer in England to write in Anglo-Norman French and one of the first writers in the country since 1066 to write in both English and Latin, shows throughout his *Confessio Amantis* the closest reading of the *Consolation,* which helps to shape both its structure and its themes, as well as familiarity with Boethius's writings on the *quadrivium,* still in circulation over eight centuries after they were written (Burrow, 2008, p. 20; Wetherbee, 2004, pp. 182–183). Thomas Usk (d. 1388), a prisoner under sentence of death in Chaucer and Gower's London, turned to his embattled sixth-century predecessor as a starting point for a personal apologia, *The Testament of Love.*

Thirty years later, London is also witness to the exiled James I of Scotland (1394–1437) beginning his *Kingis Quair* by evoking an image of the narrator reading the *Consolation* late at night. North of the border, Robert Henryson (1425–1500) draws on the Orpheus and Eurydice story in the *Consolation,* as Jean de Meun and Chaucer had done before him, for a version of the *Tale of Orpheus* in Middle Scots.

BOETHIUS SINCE THE MIDDLE AGES

The *Consolation* was never again to be culturally so prominent as it was in the late Middle Ages, though translations continued to appear in every subsequent century and many writers still showed familiarity with it and reflected its influence. In England, Samuel Johnson, Hester Lynch Thrale, Edward Gibbon, Bertrand Russell, and C. S. Lewis; in Iceland, Stefán Ólafsson; and in continental Europe, Friedrich Nietzsche (and, of course, Casanova), have already been mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

The Renaissance brought competing classical texts, newly rediscovered, and also new standards of classical Latin that led some to turn their backs on Boethius. Italian humanists in the second half of the fifteenth century began to purge writers of whom they did not approve from schools, the *Consolation*'s 'decadent' sixth-century Latin prose attracting some negative attention (Black, 2001, pp. 8, 238). Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), Italian humanist, distrusted Boethius for his Latin style, his casual dismissal of the poetic muses at the opening of the *Consolation,* and what he saw as his facile treatment of the question of free will. What he most objected to, however, was Boethius's apparent paganism. The question he kept on asking himself was the one I instinctively posed on first reading the *Consolation*: why *doesn't* Boethius explicitly refer to Christian doctrine? Because, in Valla's view, Boethius's rational consolation fails to console – by comparison with the comfort of divine grace and the prospect of personal immortality – Valla finds the ending of the work fundamentally unsatisfactory (Cameron, 2007; Boethius, 1999a, p. xlviii). He was much criticised for this opinion. Commentaries on the *Consolation* continued to be written and its poetry in particular to be praised at a time when poetry was beginning to figure more in school exercises (Nauta, 2003; Grafton, 1981, p. 412). Northern European humanists were generally positive about it and the arrival of some of them in Italy began to shift attitudes there as well (Grafton, 1981, p. 412). Thomas More was inspired by it in his *Dialogue*

of Comfort against Tribulation (the very title shows the influence), and Erasmus greatly valued Boethius's verses and, in his correspondence, defended his treatment of the muses while clearly not particularly liking his prose. In England, Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) contributed to the transmission of Boethian notions of virtue and the good in his poem 'If thou wilt mighty be', an expansion of a short verse in Book III of the *Consolation*:

> For though thy empire stretch to Indian sea
> And for thy fear trembleth the farthest Thule,
> If thy desire have over thee the power,
> Subject then art thou and no governor. (Wyatt, 1981)

Perhaps the most devoted English attention to the text in the sixteenth century was that of Queen Elizabeth I, who, in the early 1590s, beset by Catholic conspiracies, war with Spain, and the great blow of Henry IV of France's conversion to Catholicism, was very much in need of consolation. As someone who, as a young woman, had herself been imprisoned in the Tower of London by her half-sister Mary on suspicion of involvement in treasonable activities, the *Consolation* may have had an added resonance. The contemporary historian William Camden describes how in 1593, at a difficult time, the Queen found solace in the holy Scriptures, the holy Fathers, and the philosophers, being particularly 'conversant in the book of Boethius', which she then went on to translate into English. We are extraordinarily well-informed about the circumstances of this translation, which Elizabeth undertook while staying at Windsor Castle between 10th October and 8th November 1593. Most of the translation was dictated to her clerk Thomas Windebank in sessions lasting up to two hours, the whole translation taking no more than twenty-four to thirty working hours. Gaps in the manuscript were left for Elizabeth to work on her heavily revised translations of the poems, some lines of which are quite striking for their brevity and clarity, and to insert these in her own handwriting. Her linguistic skills were further demonstrated by the fact that she translated directly from the Greek the small number of quotations which Boethius had left in that language, Greek being a language which her tutor Roger Ascham claimed early in her reign she had been reading more in a day than some clerics read Latin in a week (Ascham, 1904, p. 219). A study of what was obviously a hasty, if far from incompetent, translation, designed to keep her own mind active, suggests that her main interest in the text was in its treatment of ethical rather than metaphysical matters and that she saw

the religious issues raised by Boethius from her own distinctively Christian and Reformed perspective (Mueller & Scodel, 2009, pp. 45–57).

The seventeenth century saw three further whole translations into English. More selectively, the metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan (1621–1695) translated all the poems of Books I and II while Phineas Fletcher (1582–1650) focused on Boethius's famous poem about Orpheus in Book III and on the one in Book II about the transience and futility of fame. The *Consolation* seems to have been of limited importance to John Donne (1572–1631), though he obviously knew it well and refers to it in connection with a discussion about God's eternity in his *Essayes in Divinity.* It was much more important to Milton (1608–1674) whose poem *Lycidas* and masque *Comus* both show its influence. The parallels between the *Consolation* and *Comus* run deep, with the two protagonists, Comus (Circe's son) and his Attendant Spirit, mirroring the dialogue between Boethius and Philosophy and with the use of similar cosmological and ethical themes as well as a similar Platonic flavour (Dye, 1985). In Germany, the philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716) studied the *Consolation* closely, wrote a French précis of the work in his own hand, was instrumental in publishing a German translation of the work, and praised it warmly. In his *Essays on Theodicy,* he returns to Valla's criticism of Boethius's merely 'rational' consolation and adopts a position that is closer to, if not identical with, that of Boethius, arguing that a rational consolation is both possible and wholly compatible with a Christian view of God's designs for the world (Cameron, 2007). Over a century later, Kierkegaard (1813–1855), wrestling with the same issues as Boethius, Valla, and Leibniz, picks up where these left us, as philosophers often do, as if he were simply continuing a conversation from the previous day.

The eighteenth century saw five translations into English. One of these, covering the first three books, by Alexander Pope's friend, Walter Harte, was accompanied by a poem, *Boethius: or the Upright Statesman,* which returned to the theme of Boethius as 'mirror for princes'. It takes the form of an imaginary epistle from Boethius in prison to his wife Rusticiana, drawing parallels between Boethius and the biblical Joseph and between Theoderic and the Egyptian Pharaoh. It looks as if it was the knowledge that Harte was working on this translation that curtailed the plans of Samuel Johnson and Hester Lynch Thrale to translate one poem a week (Dolson, 1922a). Pope himself also translated the book's central poem (Book III, Chapter 9), which is based on Plato's *Timaeus.* In his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Edward Gibbon provides an excellent short summary of Boethius's life and

works, seeing him as 'the last of the Romans whom Cato or Tully could have acknowledged for their countrymen'. His judgement on the *Consolation,* as often with Gibbon, pulls one simultaneously in different directions, calling it 'a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully, but which claims incomparable merit from the Barbarism of the times and the situation of the author' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 2, pp. 550–554).

From the late eighteenth century onwards, attention to Boethius falters. This may be partly the result of the slow decline in the use of Latin in the world outside the ancient universities and the leading public schools. Fewer people than in previous centuries will certainly have encountered the *Consolation* in any stage of their education. There were also no new translations in Britain between 1789 and 1897.

Apart from Robert Southey (Poet Laureate 1813–1843), there seems to have been no interest in Boethius among the Romantic poets. For Southey, he was one of 'the mighty minds of old', 'the never-failing friends … with whom I converse day by day' of his short 1818 poem 'My days among the Dead are Past'. This, together with Southey's idea for a longer 'consolation' had been originally inspired by the death in 1817 at the age of 21, following the birth of a stillborn child, of Princess Charlotte of Wales, granddaughter of George III and prospective future queen, an event which had led to an outpouring of national grief with strong parallels to the mourning which occurred for another Princess of Wales 180 years later. By the time that the work was published in 1824, as *Sir Thomas More: or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society,* it had, however, moved away from its consolatory function while still adopting a Boethian dialogic structure (Southey, 2012, pp. 313–314). Instead of *Philosophy,* Southey used as one of his interlocutors Thomas More, who had also written under Boethius's inspiration. Having informed his fellow poet Walter Savage Landor of his intention, Landor also took up the idea, producing an incredible total of five volumes of *Imaginary Conversations,* which comprised dialogues between 147 pairs of famous characters. At no point was any of this influenced by Boethius, beyond Southey telling Landor that he planned to use a dialogic structure for his own work. One does not even know whether Landor had ever read the *Consolation,* but such are the ripple effects of works like the *Consolation*; as these effects move further away from the source of influence, the results can bear little relationship to what originally stimulated them.

Otherwise, in the nineteenth century, although data about the continuing circulation and readership of earlier versions of the *Consolation* is unavailable,

it looks as if interest in Boethius was very limited outside the ranks of philosophers. Boethius is noticeable by his absence from the 1790–1880 volume of *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* and from histories of classical education during this period. Even those learned writers whom one might have expected to make some use of him – Coleridge, George Eliot, Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins – appear not to have done so. After thirteen centuries, one feels the threads that link us with the part of the classical heritage which has been the subject of this chapter finally coming apart.

In the twentieth century, although, as with other works from antiquity, the *Consolation* may have been less read, or hardly read at all, at least in the original, this was offset both by the vast amount of scholarship, which has deepened our understanding of the work and added greatly to its 'archival memory', and by the appearance of new and better translations, making access easier for the tiny groups of people still interested in the thoughts of someone seemingly so remote from the contemporary world. There have been six new English translations of the *Consolation* since the beginning of the twentieth century, in addition to an explosion of books and articles, only a few of which have been referred to in the course of this chapter.

Perhaps the twentieth century's strongest testimony to the continuing potential of the *Consolation* to stimulate its readers, however, has been John Kennedy Toole's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), in which Boethius and the *Consolation* play a central role. The novel's central character Ignatius J. Reilly is an idle and self-centred, if intelligent and amusing, loser for whom nothing good has happened since the end of the Middle Ages and for whom the *Consolation* is 'the very basis' of his worldview. He sees himself as 'a just man in an unjust society', lamenting the anarchy and degeneracy around him in 1960s New Orleans. For him, Boethius represents 'taste and decency … theology and geometry', and, as revealed in the *Consolation,* man's noble acceptance of the fate reserved for him. Toole uses Boethius's image of the wheel of Fortune as the leitmotif by which he charts Reilly's rise and fall through the picaresque twists and turns of the many and mostly comic sub-plots of the novel. Reilly's attempts to encourage others to read the *Consolation* meet with incomprehension; the one person who does so deciding after twenty pages that 'it wasn't exactly the kind of book that made you look up to the brighter side' (Toole, 1981, p. 163 and *passim*).

The twenty-first century so far has produced one notable high, David Slavitt's immensely readable and attractively published translation of the

Consolation, presented with the shortest of introductions and a complete absence of scholarly apparatus, and one notable low, Alain de Botton's *The Consolations of Philosophy,* a book described by its *Guardian* reviewer Stuart Jeffries as a work of 'obvious, hopeless or contradictory advice', which does not even have the grace to acknowledge the source of its borrowed title (Jeffries, 2000).

THE CONSOLATION AS PRISON LITERATURE

The *Consolation* also both belongs to and has itself hugely contributed to a long tradition of 'prison literature' in which those experiencing imprisonment, or some other kind of restriction such as exile, have used the occasion to communicate the thoughts and feelings that this has evoked. The ideas of imprisonment and its associated suffering, and of the pain of suffering turned into glory, are a constant in Christian literature. St Paul's four 'captivity epistles' and the stories of Christian martyrs helped to establish what one writer has called the 'paradox of gain by loss', the idea that prison could be the locus of education, that order could triumph over the chaos of suffering, that the mind could be free even if the body was captive, and that intangible things such as words, thoughts, and memories had the power to console (Zim, 2014, pp. 12, 22; Bale, 2016, pp. 4, 6). No author did more to add to this tradition than Boethius, not least because of the way in the *Consolation* he links his own fate with the similar ones of four of his distinguished predecessors: Cicero (murdered on the orders of Mark Anthony), Seneca (forced to kill himself by his pupil, Emperor Nero), Ovid (exiled by Augustus), and, above all, Socrates (sentenced to death by drinking hemlock). The *Consolation* also helped to establish other features of the tradition: the need to send a message to the outside world, use one's experience to guide others, set the record straight, testify for posterity, and show the world that, by the success of one's struggle, one has achieved 'the reward of good men' – the happiness which comes from the pursuit of virtue.

The late Middle Ages was the period when 'prison literature' linked to the *Consolation* seems to have reached its climax. In France, two of Guillaume de Machaut's poetical works are addressed to noble patrons, one imprisoned and the other about to be forced into exile as a hostage, drawing throughout on the *Consolation* and on the idea of confinement and exile as an educational opportunity. Another of Machaut's works, while not about an actual prisoner

but similarly full of Boethian references, draws an analogy between imprisonment and the fate of a suffering lover trapped by a desire he is unable to fulfil and looking for consolation. Jean Froissart's *La prison amoureuse* adopts a similar trope of love as imprisonment while being addressed in this case to a patron who was also physically, not just metaphorically, imprisoned (Elliott, 2016, *passim*).

In England, Thomas Usk (d. 1388), a casualty of the conflicts during Richard II's reign, and George Ashby (c. 1390–1475), a Lancastrian casualty of the following century's Wars of the Roses, both make use of Boethius in referring to their experiences in prison (Usk in Newgate before being sentenced to death, drawn, hanged, and then beheaded at Tyburn, while Ashby met his end in Fleet prison). Both seem less concerned about Boethian philosophy than with validating themselves through their association with an older heroic figure and the opportunity provided by their writings to explain why they have been unjustly treated. Usk's *Testament of Love* conveys the most profoundly un-Boethian message of all these works, urging one to strive hard at attaining earthly felicity using whatever means at one's disposal, and imitating:

> Lyons in the felds and lambes in chambre; egles at assaute and maydens in halle, foxes in counsayle … wolves in the felds … (so that) by these ways shul men ben avaunced. (Summers, 2004, pp. 39–40)

King James I of Scotland, who probably wrote his *Kingis Quair* around 1424, just before returning to Scotland after eighteen years of confinement in England, is similarly more focused on earthly felicity, concerned with finding out how best to ride Fortune's wheel rather than how to renounce it. Although in his poem, James goes along with the Boethian idea that imprisonment can help one achieve self-government, there was not much sign of this once he assumed control of Scotland. He proved a tyrannical ruler and met a predictably bloody end.

In the next century, Thomas More (1478–1535) proved a much more faithful reader of the *Consolation* when imprisoned in the Tower for his refusal to accept the royal supremacy at the time of the English Reformation. His *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* is a long meditation in dialogue form about the nature of tribulation, pain, persecution and death, how one might respond to these, and the possibilities for consolation. As well as

borrowing directly from Boethius in its dialogic structure and its themes, it also, like the *Consolation,* sends out a message of hope to what, in the words of Rivkah Zim, is perceived as the 'remnant of the civilised world' outside the prison – the hope that the injustice and inversion of values that have put the prisoner where he is will not ultimately prevail. It is a message one finds in other 'prison writers' in later centuries: in the seventeenth century, in John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*; in the late nineteenth century, in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*; in the twentieth century, in the prison writings, diaries, and letters of Antonio Gramsci, papers and letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and prison poems of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. None of these later writers seem to have been familiar with the *Consolation* though its indirect influence can be traced to Bonhoeffer who knew More's *Dialogue of Comfort* and meditated on it in prison before his execution by the Nazis in 1945 (Zim, 2014, pp. 78, 84, and *passim*).

WHY READ THE CONSOLATION TODAY?

The main reason for continuing to read the *Consolation,* at a time when its 1500th anniversary has recently been celebrated, is because it still succeeds in conveying succinctly, powerfully, and at times beautifully some of the core perennial values and the sense of what matters in life to be found in the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions. This is one reason – though by no means the only one – why such a large number of scholars have felt inspired to translate it over the centuries and so many poets have tried in their own languages to capture the spirit of its poems. In some ways, it may not be philosophically sophisticated, and ethically it may have had little new to say, but what it has to say has proved enormously fruitful in giving people new perspectives on their lives. It retains the potential to have similar effects today, as some of the online 'readers' comments' on David Slavitt's translation testify.

The story of the protean ways in which it has been used and adapted by different people at different times and in different countries also adds significance to any contemporary reading of the text, helping to modify the oppressive presentness one sometimes feels as an inhabitant of the first era in history that, according to Hannah Arendt, no longer feels that the past has much to teach it ('The Crisis in Education,' in Arendt, 1961, pp. 193–196).

FURTHER READING

The two recommended translations are those of P. G. Walsh (Boethius, 1999a) and David Slavitt (Boethius, 2008). I have found it useful to look at the two together but to read Slavitt's version straight through first. The rhymed verses of Walsh's translations of the poems complement Slavitt's free verse, and Walsh's introduction and detailed notes enable one to make the most of the text. The other useful modern version is that of Victor Watts (Boethius, 1999b). Courcelle's enormous appendix of drawings from medieval manuscripts is endlessly fascinating, illustrating every aspect of the *Consolation* and of Boethius's life and of the legends that have surrounded them (Courcelle, 1967). Many of the drawings show artists using a Boethian frame within which they then move off in all sorts of directions that have little to do with the context but enable them to focus on what most interests them, whether it is drawing landscapes or, in depicting Philosophy, a desire to illustrate the latest fashions in female court dress. Apart from anything else, the sheer number of extant drawings brings home to one the extent of the work's medieval dissemination.

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

Chaucer is not a neglected author in the sense that Boethius is; the former is still studied in English literature courses at university and in England is still an option in A-level English Literature. Reading his works in Middle English, however, does not come easily to many people even with the help of a glossary. Chaucer's Boethian lyrics allow one to make a start with small doses of text. They are best read in the Riverside Chaucer, whose footnotes and inbuilt Middle English dictionary enable one to make sense quickly of any phrases that prove difficult (Benson, 1987, pp. 634–635, 650–654). *A Confederacy of Dunces* is also not to be missed (Toole, 1981).

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4

THOMAS MALORY'S LE MORTE DARTHUR (1469–1470)

When Sir Lancelot in *Le Morte Darthur* finally gets close to the Holy Grail but is driven out of its presence because of his unconfessed sins, and above all his adultery with Queen Guinevere, the wife of his lord King Arthur, Malory tells us that 'he was passyng hevy and wyst nat (did not know) what to do, and so departed sore wepynge (weeping) and cursed the tyme that he was bore (born)'. Returning to where he had left his horse, he found that this, together with his sword and helmet – symbols of his identity as a knight – had also been taken from him. Sinking to the foot of a cross, he 'called hymselff a verry wrecch (wretch) and moste unhappy of all knyghtes (knights)'. 'So thus he sorowed tyll hit (it) was day', Malory adds, 'and harde (heard) the fowlys (birds) sing; than somewhat he was comforted' (Malory, 2004, pp. 518–519).

This vision of a man at his lowest point, unable to sink any lower, having lost all that was most important to him in the world, yet finding relief in the dawn chorus, and the extraordinarily simple and clear way in which Malory expresses this, had such a strong impact on me when I first read it that it has kept coming back to me over the years – not least at those times when I too have felt the need 'somewhat (to be) comforted' by the presence of familiar things and of a world beyond that of human beings. Passages like this, and there are many others which stick in the memories of those who have got into the heart of *Le Morte Darthur,* keep fresh in one's mind the power of the work and of the tragic elements within Malory's vision that can still speak directly to us more than five hundred years after it was written.

Thomas Malory is probably the person in the group of authors discussed in this book about whose life we know the least. We know even less about his relationship to his work than we do in the case of either Boethius or Plutarch. In fact not all scholars are totally convinced that the Thomas Malory to whom the work is generally attributed is indeed the author, preferring to continue to say that the work's author is simply not known. This has not prevented the appearance of a number of biographies.

If Malory was the person most scholars think he was, he joins Boethius and Bunyan as someone who wrote at least a part, and, maybe, the whole of his work, in prison. His achievement was particularly impressive given its sheer length (698 pages in the Norton edition), though, as with both Boethius and Bunyan, the conditions of his imprisonment and his access to other materials while he was writing remain obscure.

There are two questions that need to be addressed before we look at the genre, themes, and impact of *Le Morte Darthur.* The first is what we think we know about Malory and the writing of this book. The second is which version of the book we should use. There are two versions: William Caxton's 1485 printed edition, the only one available to anyone reading the book before the twentieth century, and the manuscript version discovered in Winchester College in 1934. The differences between these versions raise the question of whether we should see *Le Morte Darthur* as a single book or as several books which happen to have been put together in one manuscript.

WHO WAS SIR THOMAS MALORY?

At the end of an early section of the Winchester manuscript, its author identifies himself as 'a knyght presoner, Sir Thomas Malleorré' and elsewhere ends another section begging his readers 'that God sende hym good delyveraunce', presumably from prison. The last part of the book *The Dethe of Arthur* repeats this request, adding that:

> Whan I am deed (dead), I praye you all praye for my soule. For this book was ended the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth, by Syr Thomas Maleoré, knyght, as Jesu helpe hym, for Hys grete might, as he is the servaunt of Jesu bothe day and nyght. Amen. (Malory, 2004, p. 698)

Apart from anything else we may deduce from the text about the attitudes and experience of the author – and these are subject to different interpretations – these are the only facts that the author tells us about himself. From this exiguous information, attempts have been made to decide which of the various fifteenth-century Thomas Malorys for whom we have evidence was the author of *Le Morte Darthur.*

Given that the reference to a 'knyght presoner' (knight prisoner) only emerged in 1934 with the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, for

centuries, readers had made their way through the book with little idea who the author was. From the 1890s onwards, there was a general consensus, from other evidence, that the author was the Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire who died in 1471, but it was only the discovery of the Winchester manuscript that confirmed that one was not just looking for a knight of this name with the right dates but also for a knight of this name who had been a prisoner. Most of the evidence does point in this direction, to the extent that P. J. C. Field, Malory's most authoritative biographer, felt able to assert in 1993 that 'no-one but Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel could have written the *Morte Darthur*' (Field, 1993, p. 35). This opinion seems to be now generally, if not universally, accepted. The problem with Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel is that while there is plenty of evidence for his presence in prison for much of the 1450s, there is no hard evidence that he was in prison in the 1460s when the book was written. Nor is there any direct evidence to link any of the contenders to the book (Lumiansky, 1987, p. 883; Field, 1993, p. 4).

Assuming that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel is our man, what do we know about him? Quite a lot, given the survival of extensive fifteenth-century legal records, but frustratingly not enough about the causes and motivations behind the many events with which his biography can be linked. He seems to have come from a well-established family of Warwickshire knights. His father was an MP, two relatives were Knights Hospitaller, and a third was Mayor of Bayonne, which fits with the knowledge of lands beyond England apparent in the book. He seems to have been born in the middle of the second decade of the fifteenth century, taken over the family lands following his father's death while in his teens, and like his father, been elected MP for Warwickshire.

What has most interested biographers is the career of crime on which Sir Thomas Malory embarked in the 1450s and that led one reviewer of Field's biography to say that Malory must surely be 'the least politically correct author still commonly read', adding that, following the seemingly definitive identification of Sir Thomas Malory as the author of *Le Morte Darthur,* the potential of the work to stimulate historicist, feminist, or anthropological interpretations 'had just been very much expanded' (Shippey, 1994, p. 23).

In 1450, Malory comes to our attention in the records as, at the head of twenty-six armed men, laying an ambush for his former patron, the Duke of Buckingham, in the abbot's woods in Combe in Warwickshire. In May or June of the same year, he is also accused of rape and extortion at Monks

Kirby, the allegation being that he broke into the house of Hugh Smith and 'feloniously raped and carnally lay by' Joan Smith, and also extorted a hundred shillings from two persons. A further charge of rape, again against Mrs Smith, and of extortion and theft against Mr Smith, this time involving premises in both Monks Kirby and Coventry, followed in August. His activities continued into 1451 when, near Newbold Revel, and along with five others, he stole seven cows, two calves, 335 sheep, and a cart. He was also in a dispute with the Carthusian monks of Monks Kirby and Axholme, which led to him being threatened with arrest if he failed to give security to do no damage to their property.

Not content with all this, he appears to have broken into the park of the Duke of Buckingham at Caludon near Coventry, stealing six does and doing damage estimated at the enormous sum of £500 (over £300,000 in today's money). Buckingham, however, was only the joint owner of the park, the other owners being the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who also demanded redress. He was arrested by Buckingham and handed over to the sheriff of Coventry, who locked him up in a manor house, from which he escaped by swimming the moat. The following night, having gathered together a band of followers or 'well-wyllers' (as the evil Mordred was to do in *Le Morte Darthur* when planning an ambush of Sir Lancelot), he battered down the doors of Combe Abbey and stole ornaments and money worth £86, returning next day, this time with a hundred armed 'well-wyllers', to break them down again, insult the monks, cause damage, and steal five rings, a small psalter, two silver belts, three rosaries (of coral, amber, and jet), two bows, three sheaves of arrows, and £40 in money.

He was arrested, charged in court in Nuneaton with some of these offences, and then moved to the King's Bench in London. He spent most of the remainder of the 1450s in different London prisons: Ludgate, the Marshalsea, Newgate, and the Tower of London. There were periods of release on bail, at the end of one of which he failed to reappear. There was another escape, a recapture, and a repeated failure to bring him to trial, seemingly out of fear that jurors might acquit him. He was clearly seen as a dangerous person. Some of this was probably political, given the evidence linking him to the Yorkists in the ongoing civil war between Yorkists and Lancastrians. His final release from prison looks as if it coincided with the arrival of the Yorkists in London in 1460, and a couple of years later, he can be found besieging Lancastrian castles in the north of England alongside the Yorkist king Edward IV (Field, 1993, pp. vii–xxxiv).

Trying to move behind this narrative of events to understand something of their causation is extraordinarily difficult. Even if we had Malory himself in front of us, we might not have answers to most of our questions, given his reluctance as an author to do much more than tell us *how* it was rather than delve into *why* it was. On the surface, there seems a huge discrepancy between the disreputable historical Malory and the author of *Le Morte Darthur* with his concern for chivalry, his contempt for knights who flout the code of their order, and his emphasis on the Round Table's annual Pentecostal oath:

> Never to do outerage (gross offences) nothir mourthir (nor murder) … and to gyff (give) mercy unto hym that askith mercy … and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen (gentlewomen) and wydowes socour (succour), strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell, for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (Malory, 2004, p. 77)

There is a particular irony in an early episode in *Le Morte Darthur* when, in a passage Malory has added to what is found in his sources, Sir Lancelot says of a fellow knight:

> What? … is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher (ravisher) of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth (oath). Hit (It) is pyté (pity) that he lyvyth! (Malory, 2004, p. 269)

Discrepancies between what authors write and how they behave are hardly surprising. This was a time of low-level disorder, as well as of civil war, as the many surviving letters of mid-fifteenth-century Englishmen and women suggest (Radulescu, 2005, p. 129). We do not know whether any of Malory's *outerages* were provoked or whether they were more political than personal. We even do not know whether Malory was guilty of raping Mrs Smith, given that the charges were pressed by Mr Smith and that under a statute of Richard II a man who eloped with a consenting married woman was deemed guilty of rape (Field, 1993, pp. 105–106; Batt, 1997). All we know are what his accusers said about him. He never appears to have been convicted, and even if we had a conviction, we would have had little confidence that justice had been administered fairly (Vinaver, 1963, p. 30).

None of this information about Malory's imprisonment in the 1450s helps us understand the circumstances in which he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*

during the following decade since there is no evidence for his imprisonment during that period. It is this absence that has led to speculation about other Thomas Malorys being the author. What we do know, however, is that he seems to have had links with the prominent Earl of Warwick ('Warwick the Kingmaker') and may well have shifted his allegiance from the Yorkists to the Lancastrians around the time that Warwick did so in the late 1460s. We know that Malory was one of a small number of individuals explicitly excluded from general pardons issued by the Yorkist Edward IV, which may help to explain why he was in prison again when he finished *Le Morte Darthur,* as he himself says in the book, during the ninth year of Edward IV's reign, in other words, some time between March 1469 and March 1470. It is assumed, if this theory is correct, that he would have been released at some point around the time of Edward IV's retreat into exile in October 1470 and the short-lived restoration of the Lancastrian king Henry VI, only to die not long afterwards on 14th March 1471.

Since there is no evidence as to where and in what conditions Malory was imprisoned while he was writing *Le Morte Darthur,* we do not know how he was able to get hold of the many, in some cases, very lengthy, French and English Arthurian texts on which the different parts of the book were based. We do know that his many years in prison, given conditions in fifteenth-century prisons, must have been a hard trial, at least at times. This is certainly reflected in *Le Morte Darthur* where knights – Lancelot, Trystram, Palomides, King Arthur himself, and others – suffer periods of imprisonment. At one point when Trystram is in prison he falls ill and Malory's comment feels like it comes straight from personal experience:

> So Sir Trystram endured there grete payne, for syknes (sickness) had undirtake hym – and that ys the grettist payne a presoner may have, for all the whyle a presonere may have hys helth of body, he may endure undir the mercy of God and in hope of good delyveraunce; But whan syknes towchith (toucheth) a presoners body, than may a presoner say all welth ys hym berauffte (he is bereft of all wealth), and than hath he cause to wayle and wepe. (Malory, 2004, p. 327)

In *Le Morte Darthur,* it is those who do the imprisoning who are shamed, not the prisoners themselves, who are shown, in ways that Foucault would have recognised, as victims of the arbitrary exercise of power (Foucault, 2000).

Prisoners also continue to show their moral worth in prison by maintaining their defiance and refusing to accept conditions for their release that they deem unworthy. Lancelot, for example, would rather die in prison than take as his paramour one of the queens who have captured him. Others would rather die than agree to fight for the evil knight who has imprisoned them. Some of these stories are Malory's own inventions – as opposed to ones derived from earlier sources – and one of the few glimpses of the author's personal experience that emerge in the course of the narrative (Davidson, 2004).

DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE TEXT

Until the mid-twentieth century, only one source of the text of *Le Morte Darthur* was known – the edition printed by William Caxton in 1485, fourteen years after Malory's death. Only two copies of this first edition survive. The prologue to the first edition only mentions Malory in passing as its author (Caxton, 2004). It was Caxton who gave the work its French title *Le Morte Darthur,* which mis-describes a work that is largely about Arthur's life and also, as elsewhere in Caxton's writings, uses the French definite article idiosyncratically (*le* rather than *la*). At the very end of the work, Caxton, however, adds, 'Here is the ende of *The Hoole* (Whole) *Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knygthes of the Rounde Table*', a title that is more appropriate and may have been Malory's own (Malory, 2004, footnote on page 1).

As well as giving the work a title, Caxton also divided it into 21 books and 507 chapters, with their own titles, while at the same time presenting the whole very much as a single unified work. It is generally agreed that Caxton did a good job in many ways and that his version is still worth reading (Shaw, 1963). While accepting that Caxton made changes to the manuscript version he was using, in other ways, it was assumed that this was the closest we were ever going to get to Malory's original manuscript.

Then, in 1934, Walter Oakeshott, at that time a librarian and young don (teacher) at the boys boarding school Winchester College, founded in 1382, stumbled upon a copy of *Le Morte Darthur* while searching in the Fellows Library, with permission from the Fellows' Librarian, for sixteenth-century works with which to illustrate his lessons. The manuscripts kept in a safe in the bedroom of the Warden, in another part of the Warden's Lodgings, proved disappointing for this purpose, though in looking through them

he came across a particularly thick manuscript, a paper codex of 480 leaves that was missing its beginning and end and that was obviously about King Arthur and his knights.[22]

Having never read Malory, Oakeshott did not at the time appreciate its significance. It was only by chance that, when setting up an exhibition of old books for some visitors a few weeks later, he came across a reference to *Le Morte Darthur* in *The Cambridge History of English Literature,* which mentioned that 'no manuscript of the work is known'. Buying a copy of the Everyman edition of the Caxton version in the college bookshop, he checked it against the manuscript in the safe and realised immediately both that it was a copy of *Le Morte Darthur* and that the differences between the two versions were significant. As far as English medieval literature is concerned, this has been described as the most important discovery of the twentieth century (Field, 2005, pp. vii–xxxiv, 1). After drawing attention to his discovery in a couple of articles, Oakeshott generously handed over the mammoth task of editing the new version of the book to the Russian-born Arthurian scholar Professor Eugène Vinaver, whose new edition appeared in 1947 (Oakeshott, 1963).

Winchester and Oakeshott's discovery of the manuscript are never far from my mind when reading *Le Morte Darthur.* This is partly because Malory is the first Arthurian writer to identify Winchester with Camelot, where King Arthur in the book holds his court, so it is highly appropriate that this is where the manuscript had lingered over so many centuries before it was discovered (Malory, 2004, p. 61). More importantly, it is because between 2000 and 2003, I was Oakeshott's successor as Headmaster of Winchester College (he returned to Winchester as headmaster after the Second World War) and spent many weekends at Fellows (governors) meetings in the Warden's Lodgings, though never of course penetrated into the Warden's bedroom. It was a place where every period since its foundation in the fourteenth century had left its mark like a palimpsest, a place where – like Malory's text, once you get into it – the barrier between the distant past and the present gets broken down.

[22] By the mid-1400s, parchment, in use for manuscripts since the fourth century A D, had been largely replaced by paper, hence its use both for the Winchester manuscript and for Caxton's printed version, which was to follow. The fact that no other manuscript versions have survived may reflect the accidents of history, that only fifteen years elapsed before the first print edition made further manuscript versions unnecessary, or that the existence of Malory's text was either not widely known or, if it was, aroused little interest. We shall probably never know.

ONE BOOK OR SEVERAL?

Vinaver's 1947 edition of the text was called *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* on the grounds that the Winchester manuscript can readily be divided up into eight separate romances and that these are self-contained tales which were not necessarily intended by Malory to form a single work. The debate about whether what for centuries had been known as *Le Morte Darthur* was one book or several has continued ever since.

The work clearly lacks the kind of unity one expects from a modern novel; some of the tales are relatively self-contained, and there are minor inconsistencies between the different parts of the narrative (Miller, 1991). Despite this, the consensus among scholars is that there is an overall cohesion in the work's literary effect: the eight books are consecutive, the beginnings and ends of tales are linked together, there are numerous forwards and backwards references, and character is developed in coherent ways across different books. There is also a unity in the underlying moral tone of the work and its concern for the principles of chivalry and a clear movement across the eight books from birth through maturity to decline and death, which gives the work its distinctive tragic dimension (Brewer, 1963; Lumiansky, 1987, p. 886; Meale, 1996, pp. 3–5).

What we still do not have, however, is Malory's original manuscript. We may not even be close to it in that there appears to have been at least another version behind the version from which the two Winchester manuscript scribes were copying and similarly with the two versions that Caxton used in preparing his printed edition (one of which was the Winchester manuscript known to have been in his workshop during the printing). There is even a possibility that one of the versions used by Caxton was closer to the original than the Winchester manuscript and that therefore Caxton's printed edition is a truer reflection of what Malory intended (Lumiansky, 1987, pp. 887–897; Meale, 1996, p. 17).

Another scholar recently given special permission to look for a short period of time at the actual Winchester manuscript in the British Library, rather than the usual facsimile, has now suggested that the c. 80 marginal comments on the manuscript drawing attention to key characters and deeds may well have been Malory's own, thus suggesting that the Winchester MS may have Malory's actual stamp on it after all (Whetter, 2017, p. 432).

As with Malory's identity, however, an element of doubt about all this is likely to remain. In one way it does not matter, as, insofar as different versions

generate different meanings, this leaves the reader with a choice, enabling us – as we always do with books – to concentrate on the ones that generate the most interesting readings for ourselves (Meale, 1996, pp. 16–17).

WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS LE MORTE DARTHUR?

Le Morte Darthur is a part, an important part, and in English arguably the most important part, of a whole corpus of Arthurian writing, about the exploits of King Arthur, which supposedly took place in the period following the collapse of Roman rule in Britain in the fifth century. It is a corpus of works that extends from the ninth and tenth centuries to the present day, but one that contains elements of the story that go back much further, even beyond the fifth century in which it is supposedly set. Francis Pryor has found what he feels are echoes of the Bronze and Iron Ages in the preoccupation with swords being thrown into water or pulled out of stones and of late Romano-British Gnosticism in the idea of the Holy Grail.

The legend of Arthur took clearer shape in 1138 with the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*) of Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom Pryor describes as 'the father of the mythical King Arthur, who was largely his invention' (Pryor, 2005, pp. i, 27, 112, 115, 219, 243). This propagated the myth of Britain's foundation by Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, the Trojan founder of Rome, and the idea that this gave his successor Arthur a claim to the Roman throne. In Geoffrey's account, Arthur fights off both Saxon invaders and the Roman army, dying undefeated but betrayed by his nephew Mordred. He leaves behind him the legend of a good and noble king and the hope that one day he might return, an idea found in *Le Morte Darthur* where, in the Caxton edition, Arthur's tomb is inscribed *Hic jacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus* (Here lies Arthur, king once, king to be) (Malory, 2004, p. 689).[23]

Medieval histories and romances based on the lives of King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table are a pan-European phenomenon from the twelfth century onwards. The medieval accounts of the life and exploits of Tristram, one of the most important knights of the Round Table, which

[23] Hence the title of T. H. White's 1958 Arthurian story *The Once and Future King* (1958). This book sold well in the US and may have been the origin of the description of President J. F. Kennedy's inner circle as 'Camelot' (Taylor & Brewer, 1983, pp. 291–295).

survive in French, English, German, Italian, Czech, Icelandic, Danish, and Faroese, take up over 1,000 pages alone of the French Pléiade compilation *Tristan et Yseut* (an edition far from complete, the 267 pages of Malory's *The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Sir Trystrams de Lyones* not being included) (Marchello-Nizia, 1995, p. 1610 and *passim*). As C. S. Lewis put it in a brilliant essay on *Le Morte Darthur,* Malory's achievement was to add another building block to a 'great cathedral of words', which because of the contributions over the centuries of so many 'restorers, improvers, demolitionists … (and even) misunderstanders … imposes on us a meaning which is largely independent of their varying and perhaps incompatible purposes' (Lewis, 1963, p. 25).

Malory took Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, which had been largely followed by other Arthurian writers up to Malory's time, turned Arthur into an English rather than British king (while incongruously keeping a fifth century date) and kept Arthur's victory over the Romans but delayed the betrayal and rebellion of Mordred (now his son rather than nephew) until the end of the story instead of it being the immediate aftermath. This enabled him to write a book that begins with the birth of Arthur, his marriage with Guinevere, and the founding of the Round Table of knights, shows how he established his kingdom within Britain and defeated the Romans, proceeds through the accounts of the adventures of many of the different knights of the Round Table, with a particular focus on Sir Lancelot and Sir Trystram, shows some of these knights taking part in the search for the Holy Grail, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, and ends with the decline and collapse of the Round Table following a civil war and with the deaths of the book's main characters Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and Gawain. Chivalry is the main theme of the book, Lancelot, 'the most noblest knight of the world', its hero, and Lancelot's sin – his adultery with Queen Guinevere – the root cause of the shattering of the Arthurian dream.

Although most of Malory's sources for his stories were in verse and in French, still a widely used language of his social class, he chose to write in English prose. Malory's decision to write in English prose has been seen as comparably important to Chaucer's decision in the previous century to write in English verse rather than in French or in Latin. A much stronger tradition of writing in the prose vernacular had been established in France by the middle of the fifteenth century than in England, and Malory may have been influenced by the six French prose romances he used as sources to write in prose rather than verse but to do so in English. Although a few works that could be described as prose romances had been written in English

before his time, there is no evidence that Malory was aware of them (Field, 1971, pp. 22–24; Archibald & Edwards, 1996, pp. xiv–xv; Meale, 1996, p. 12).

One reason why Malory may have found the approach of prose romances to be more congenial than that of metrical romances was the association of prose with the genres of chronicle and epic and their more direct claims to truth. Metrical romances were more likely to end in reconciliation and social harmony, whereas prose romances, as they were closer to historical truth, were often more realistic, less comforting, and more likely to include elements of jealousy, hatred, and division (Cooper, 1997). And this is what, alongside brighter moments and instances of community, Malory clearly wished to convey in *Le Morte Darthur,* to the extent that to call the book a romance at all might be a misnomer, not least because of the associations of romance with medieval ideals of courtly love. These were ideals in which Malory was clearly not very interested and which also do not fit easily with the powerful women who people his pages.

Le Morte Darthur has a tragic sub-text from quite early on: in the story of Balyn and Balan who kill each other, in the hints of future disaster arising from the unwitting incest of Arthur and Morgause and the birth of their son Mordred, as well as from the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. This eventually takes over as the work's dominant mode, the book ending with many of the people rejecting Arthur, the doubly fatal duel of King Arthur and Mordred, horrific Goyaesque scenes of war, the collapse of the Round Table, and the withdrawal of Lancelot and Guinevere into (separate) penitential seclusion and their subsequent deaths. *Le Morte Darthur* is light years away from a book that is mostly about knights and their *damosels* and that hopes that everything in the end might turn out alright. So, if one wishes to identify its genre, calling it a 'romantic tragedy' might be best (Tolhurst, 2005, pp. 145–147; Whetter, 2005).

MALORY'S SOURCES

Every part of *Le Morte Darthur* has a known source which Malory follows more or less closely, and sometimes very closely indeed, except *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney* and no critic imagines that Malory wrote that from scratch. That was simply not the way he set about writing. Far from worrying about plagiarism, Malory was keen to show that his account had the authority given it by one of his sources and did not wish to be seen to be inventing and creating new things,

even when he was doing so. The phrase 'For, as the Freynshhe (French) booke seyth (sayeth)' recurs throughout *Le Morte Darthur,* sometimes even when it does not (McCarthy, 1996, p. 78). The book therefore has multiple authorship, though, as C. S. Lewis's architectural analogy suggested, it was Malory who re-painted things here, adding new stones there, demolishing bits he did not like, and in doing so – maybe without conscious intention – creating a work of art that, seen as a whole, begins to look original and new.

Identifying Malory's sources and comparing these with what Malory did with them has turned into a huge scholarly industry, as a result of which we know much more about Malory's way of working. But we do not know all. Malory was working just before the coming of the printed book and made use of manuscript copies, none of which have survived. Given the considerable variety between manuscript versions of a source, we cannot always be absolutely certain, down to the particular word and phrase, quite what has been changed (Malory, 2004, p. 703).

Six of Malory's main sources were French prose romances: about Lancelot, Tristram, the quest for the Grail, Merlin, and the death of Arthur. His three English sources were all metrical: a fourteenth-century *Morte Arthur* written in eight-line stanzas; an alliterative verse *Morte Arthure* written c. 1400 (and beautifully translated into modern English alliterative verse in 2012 by Simon Armitage, England's Poet Laureate); and John Hardyng's rime royal *Chronicle,* a history of Britain which exists in two versions, one written for Henry VI and a later one for Edward IV, the later one being widely circulated around the time Malory was in prison (Malory, 2004, pp. 701–704; Armitage, 2012). Malory's text also seems to bear the impress of a range of other sources, such as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and some of his *Canterbury Tales,* as well as works by the twelfth-century poet Chrétien de Troyes and the fifteenth-century poet John Ludgate, suggesting that Malory might have had slightly wider literary interests than his biographer P. J. C. Field, who described his mind as 'strikingly unacademic' and his reading as largely confined to Arthurian literature, had imagined. The specific influence of these sources on *Le Morte Darthur,* however, can rarely, if ever, be proved.

The main difference between Malory and his major sources is in length. It has been estimated that Malory's version in each case was never more than half the length of the original and, at its lowest, was down to an eighth (Field, 1971, p. 9). This extensive abbreviation has often been felt to have been very much to the advantage of the story, in making it more sharply focused on what is important and thus clearer and more powerful in its impact on the

reader. Many of Malory's sources were also highly interwoven or 'polyphonic', in the sense that a number of individual storylines are constantly stopping and restarting, being interrupted by each other, and requiring readers and listeners constantly to make connections between them or go back to their memories of earlier episodes. Malory did a great deal to simplify this, though the text is still littered with sentences like 'Now leve we Sir Palomydes and Sir Dynadan in the castell of Beale Valet, and turne we agayne unto Kynge Arthure'. As C. S. Lewis and Eugène Vinaver have pointed out, it is a real technique, not just a muddle, one praised by Dante and found in other poets such as Ovid and Spenser. If one likes Malory, Lewis said, it will not be despite this feature but at least in part because of it (Lewis, 1963, pp. 13–14).

As well as cutting back on the polyphony and abbreviating, and partly *because* of doing this, Malory also often turned texts that were relatively literary into ones that were relatively colloquial. He removed quite a lot of the erotic elements in his sources, together with elements of introspection, in line with his general interest in focusing on the historical and public aspects of the story and on the theme of chivalry. Despite being both religious and ethical, in certain fundamental ways, he also seems to have had little interest in doctrine or any close affinity with mysticism, which makes parts of his *Noble Tale of the Sankgreal* (Holy Grail) less than satisfactory in the eyes of some readers, though C. S. Lewis – no stranger to mysticism – is impatient with these criticisms (Field, 1971, p. 10; Cooper, 1996, p. 184; Malory, 2004, p. 703; Lewis, 1963, pp. 14–20).

Malory is often closer to his sources in his earlier books. In the second book, where he relates the war between King Arthur and his knights and the Emperor Lucius of Rome, he sticks close to the abbreviated text of the alliterative *Morte Arthure,* turning it into prose while keeping much of the alliteration and some of the poem's more archaic English usage. Although Malory's Middle English is mostly highly readable once one has got used to a small number of new words or, in the case of some editions, such as the Norton one which I am using in this chapter, different spellings of familiar words, the second book requires slightly more frequent recourse to a glossary. But it does not need a glossary to pick up the sense, through the alliteration, of the following:

> Than they were so wroth (wrathful/angry) that (turn) away wolde they never, but rathly russhed oute their swerdys (swords) and hyttys on their helmys (helmets) with hatefull dyntys (blows) and stabbis at his stomakys with swerdys well steled. (Malory, 2004, p. 141)

Malory was fascinated by sound and, elsewhere in the book, creates alliterative passages out of non-alliterative sources, using alliteration for some of the most climactic phrases of *Le Morte Darthur,* and doing so more effectively, especially later in the book. More generally towards the end of the book, Malory seems to have gained the confidence to put his own stamp on the story and, in the concluding *Dethe of Arthur,* to do so at times with brilliant effect (Field, 1971, p. 73).

MALORY'S STYLE

Although Malory can easily be criticised for his inattention to the consistency of details in the story, and, according to taste, for the tediousness of some of the information, like the long lists of knights with which he frequently bombards his reader, his style has been widely admired. It is simple, formal, direct, unselfconscious, unsophisticated, utterly unliterary, and in a sense artless, yet often powerful and at times very moving. The fact that for much of the time Malory is cutting other people's materials down to size – his *Tale of Balyn and Balan* reduces 38,000 words down to 11,000 without omitting almost any of the action – can give his writing a pace and terseness lacking in the original. Malory is writing a history, turning romance material into chronicle form, and therefore is more concerned with narration, and with the dialogue that supports the narration, than with description. Of the latter, there is relatively little – we do not know, for example, as Robert Graves pointed out, the colour of the eyes of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot – though the narrative, focusing on people's actions rather than thoughts, is rarely without a visual element (Field, 1971, p. 73).

In narrating events, Malory is much more concerned with the events than with telling us about his own perception of them. He is telling the story as it happened, as if there is no doubt that it happened, and as if there is no other way in which the events might be narrated. The impression this gives is one of objectivity, of describing the world as it is. There is irony in the book, but only in the way characters express themselves. There is also some humour, though, again, this comes across as an intrinsic element of the events being described, not as an expression of an authorial attitude.

Much in Malory's style can be explained by the fact that he was writing in the vernacular at a time when oral literary traditions were still strong. Its colloquialism, its focus on the concrete rather than the abstract, its use of

alliteration, ellipsis, and repetition, and its occasional direct address to the reader – 'Lo, ye, all Englysshemen, se (see) ye what a mischief here was?' – are all characteristics of an author wanting to anchor things in listeners' minds and provide them with mnemonic aids to enable them to do so (McCarthy, 1988; reproduced in Malory, 2004, pp. 856–865).

Malory's syntax is largely very simple, an unqualified clause without coordinates and subordinates being his most typical construction. This, in many cases, was a conscious departure from the stylistic features of his more elaborate and largely French sources and, as such, a choice of greater simplicity and directness. He tells us what happens in sequence, one thing after another, with little or no attempt at explanation. Narrative sentences typically begin with 'and', 'but', 'then', 'so', and 'for'. The following is typical:

> Than Kynge Pellymore armed hym and mownted uppon hys horse, and rode more than a pace after the lady that the knyght lad (led) away. And as he rode in a foreyste he saw in a valey a damesell sitte by a well, and a wounded knyght in her armys. And Kynge Pellymore salewed (greeted) hir, and whan she was ware (aware) of him, she cryed on lowde and syde, 'Helpe me, knyght, for Jesuys sake!' (Malory, 2004, p. 73)

Simple tenses are used, mostly the present and the preterite, but not the historic present, thus giving the impression, more appropriate to a historical account, of a time that has passed. Nouns are often not qualified with adjectives, and where adjectives are used, they are often simple, stock ones. Latinate polysyllabic words, and classical references generally, are avoided, though he uses many words derived from the French, as well as Gallicisms of syntax such as putting an adjective after a noun, as was common within his class at the time (Field, 1971, pp. 48, 54, 61, 65, 70).

The sense that the narrative is simply conveying things as they are, and that Malory is taking us into a world familiar alike to characters, readers, and narrator, is further enhanced by the frequent use of aphorisms, proverbs, and adages. Expressions such as 'A good man ys never in daungere but whan he ys in the daungere (power) of a cowhard', 'But in God is all', 'there shalt thou fynde thy matche', 'There nys none other remedye', 'allwayes a good man woll do ever to another man as wolde be done to hymselff', and 'ayenste (against) deth may no man rebell' can be found throughout *Le Morte Darthur* and help to give an air of impersonal authority to the more profound but more implicit ethical messages that one feels Malory is trying to convey

as he works his way towards them in the course of writing the book and as it comes towards its end.

KNIGHTHOOD AND CHIVALRY

Malory was a knight and a minor member of the aristocracy. In *Le Morte Darthur,* his concern is almost entirely with that world. As Robert Graves noticed, 'no mention can be found', as in the *Iliad,* of the 'base-born fighter' (Graves, 1963, p. xiv). Apart from knights, the only other people who figure are ladies and holy men. All the former and most of the latter are also of aristocratic birth. When the people raise their heads at the end of the book and give their support to Mordred, Malory denounces their treachery.

But Malory was not uncritical of his own class. Throughout the book, a distinction is made between good knights and bad knights. Bad knights are deformed by hatred or unable to put their personal jealousies and ambitions aside for the sake of the common good. Some of them are murderers, traitors, and cowards. They abuse women and unjustly imprison fellow knights. They make unsafe the lands in which they carry out their depredations. Good knights, by contrast, accept that, as a result of their birthright, they have a duty to do more than just look after their own interests. As Sir Percival says to his mother on leaving home: 'A, my swete mothir, we may not abyde (stay), for we be comyn of kynges bloode . . . hit ys our kynde to haunte armys and noble dedys (deeds)' (Malory, 2004, p. 475; Tucker, 1963, pp. 66–67). Knights have duties to their community and to their king. They recognise their bonds with their fellow knights, showing them companionship. They treat women with respect and go to their rescue when they are in distress. They obey the oath of their knightly order, which they swear annually at the Pentecostal feast at Camelot. Good knights are 'noble', have not lost their 'worship' (their reputation), and have no cause for shame.

Insofar as *Le Morte Darthur* has a dominant theme, whether or not Malory would have been able explicitly to articulate this theme, it is about the concept of knighthood and its linked concept of chivalry. This is clearly what interested him most. It is a theme that is present from the beginning of the book and develops in different directions as he takes the stories of Arthur and his knights from the origins of the Round Table through to its final decline and collapse. In the early sections of the book, where Arthur establishes his kingdom within Britain in wars against rivals in areas around England's

borders and embarks on the continental adventure which ends with his victory over Rome, the focus is very much on the martial aspects of knighthood and on the knight's prowess as shown in his performance in combat. Fights, tournaments, and battles (the latter in the early and final parts) are a recurring feature of the book and distinctions are made among knights as to their degrees of chivalrousness based on the behaviours they exhibit in these situations. Underlying prowess and the pursuit of fame is the search for honour and reputation. The word most commonly used to describe the latter is 'worship', and it is the loss of 'worship', and the shame arising from this, that knights most fear. In the world of *Le Morte Darthur,* what is important is often not so much the inner life and one's private knowledge of what one has done but the public recognition of one's actions. Lancelot is quick to challenge his critics to a duel and more than willing to kill them because they have accused him and Queen Guinevere of adultery even when he knows full well that they are guilty. As long as one's observable behaviour does not give the game away, it can seem acceptable for a knight to lie about what remains hidden.

It is for this reason that *Le Morte Darthur* has been seen as a work in which honour and shame are more real than innocence and guilt, and, therefore, as one that is only 'superficially Christian' (Benson, 1996, p. 234; Lambert, 1975; reproduced in Malory, 2004, pp. 849–855). But Malory's world, and Malory himself, despite the occasional impression to the contrary, were far from indifferent to ethical issues. Knights might be expected to pursue 'worship', and to lie for the sake of avoiding scandal and 'noise', but at the same time to be true to their word and to be generous, merciful, humble, self-denying, discreet, forgiving, and gracious. Malory's chivalry has deep roots in Christianity and, through Christianity, in the Hebrew Bible and the ethical traditions of Greece and Rome.

Knights were also expected to show 'fellowship' – companionship, loyalty, mutual support – in their relations with their fellow knights and, as part of a more permanent and solemn bond, through their membership of King Arthur's Round Table, a chivalric order with echoes both of the Order of the Garter founded by Edward III and of the professional crusading orders (Archibald, 1992). To Malory, 'fellowship' with one's fellow knights, and thus male companionship, could be as powerful as the love of a knight for his lady. At the end of the book, when 'fellowship' has given way to conflict between rival families arising out of Lancelot's determination to rescue Guinevere from being burnt for adultery, Arthur shows far more concern

for the collapse of the Round Table than for the fate of his lifelong partner, commenting with striking callousness that 'quenys (queens) I myght have inow (enough), but such a felyship (fellowship) of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs (together) in no company' (Malory, 2004, p. 658).

Such a statement seems un-chivalrous only if we insist on seeing chivalry as centred on courtly love, but this was the vision of chivalry, found in many of the Arthurian romances and in some of the source books used for *Le Morte Darthur,* with which Malory was decidedly ill at ease (Barber, 1996, pp. 20–21, 32). What he seems to have disliked about the courtly love tradition was that it was so artificial. He cut back on the erotic elements in his sources, not because he seems to have had any hang-ups about physical love but because he disliked the way something ordinary, natural, and spontaneous had been turned into something self-conscious and contrived (Tucker, 1963, pp. 79–82). When told by her father to stop thinking about her unrequited love for Lancelot, Elayne of Ascolat (a forerunner of Tennyson's Lady of Shalott) exclaims:

> Why sholde I leve such thoughtes? Am I nat am erthely (earthly) woman? and all the whyle the brethe ys in my body I may complayne me (I may lament), for my belyves (beliefs) that I do none offence, though I love an erthely man, unto God; for He fourmed me thereto – and all maner of good love comyth of God, and other than good love loved I never Sir Launcelot du Lake. (Malory, 2004, p. 615)

The problem for Malory comes when he is dealing with Lancelot. He is 'the worshipfullest knyght of the world' and Malory's exemplar of chivalry. At one point, Lancelot also makes clear to one of his female admirers that courtly love is no part of his conception of knighthood. He will take neither wife nor paramour, he says, as this would force him to 'leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures' and 'be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys (wars)' (Malory, 2004, p. 164). But he does have a secret paramour in the person of the Queen and a love which, on both sides, is as passionate, natural, and spontaneous as that of Elayne of Ascolat, but which – the world of the book being a Christian one – is also deeply sinful and a potential bar to salvation.

Malory plays down Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere by comparison with some of his sources, but, in the end, he does not hide the fact that their love is consummated. It is for this sin, and for his sin of pride, that Lancelot, though he gets closer to the Holy Grail than all but three of his companions,

is barred from a complete vision. Recognising his faults, he agrees to do penance but loses no time in returning to Guinevere.

Malory deals with the ambiguity of having 'the floure of all kyghtes' as an adulterer and a man disloyal to his lord by accepting that his exemplar of chivalry is flawed and, in the final parts of the book, by illustrating how the qualities of loyalty and honour, which are at the heart of chivalry, also carry within themselves the seeds of its destruction. It is Lancelot's unwavering fidelity to Guinevere – for which we are nonetheless encouraged to feel compassion – that makes him disloyal to his lord and brings about his quarrel with those fellow knights who, out of (seeming) loyalty to the same lord, wish to punish his unfaithful wife. As the quarrels develop, it is also a case of family and clan loyalties taking precedence over loyalty to the Round Table. The upshot is the disintegration of 'fellowship' and the collapse of the attempt, which the Round Table symbolised, of establishing in this world an order based on Malory's principles of chivalry. At the very end of the book, with the Round Table 'disparbeled' (scattered), Lancelot and his companions devote their lives to religion, as 'Crysten knyghtes' following a monastic life and, after Lancelot's death, in the case of four of them, in the Holy Land, fighting 'many bataylles upon the myscreantes or Turkes' and dying there 'upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake' (Malory, 2004, p. 697). But Malory does not suggest that the ideals of chivalry, which have been the main theme of his book, are now redundant in an environment that has other exigencies. He has shown how they are challenged by contrary and dark forces, as they were in England in the Wars of the Roses, in which he appears to have taken part, but that they have a relevance which extends beyond both ancient and contemporary times.

P. E. Tucker, in his excellent essay on chivalry in *Le Morte Darthur,* argues that for Malory 'chivalry was the outward and temporal expression of inner and timeless virtues' (Tucker, 1963, p. 103). It is perhaps this underlying and pervasive sense in the book that the values behind chivalry apply to much more than just knights, tournaments, battles, and damsels that has helped *Le Morte Darthur* keep its appeal over the centuries to people of different ages and backgrounds (Davidson, 2004, p. 62).

MALORY'S WOMEN

The flurry of studies in recent decades about the role of women in *Le Morte Darthur* is not to be explained just by the directing of a spotlight on previously

neglected aspects of literature arising from the growth of gender-related studies. No one can read *Le Morte Darthur* without noticing that, though we may be witnessing a patriarchal world in action, it is nonetheless a world within which there are a large number of women who are powerful agents in their own right.

Although Malory, as we have seen, is not that interested in love between the sexes and is in particular averse to giving too much attention to the courtly love tradition of medieval romances, his knights still need their 'ladies' whose colours they wear in tournaments, whose honour they need to defend, and whom they must rescue in distress. Many of the quests of individual knights described in the book involve the righting of wrongs – coercion, imprisonment, violence and rape – with which women are threatened. Protection from rape and revenge for rape is a recurring theme. There are many rapes in the story (one of which is of a holy man). They are seen as exemplary of the dark forces which pervade the world and which knights need to struggle against (Batt, 1997, pp. 85–86, 90).

The role of women in the book is very far from being wholly passive. Without their 'ladies', knights would lose the opportunities, so important to them, for gaining 'worship' and thus an important part of their *raison d'être.* This gives women significant power (Nolan, 1996, p. 177). In Lancelot's case, there is a strong element of subservience in his relationship with Guinevere. Lancelot submits the purposes of his life to her will, accepts her right to arbitrate and judge knightly conduct, and sends defeated knights to her (rather than to Arthur) for fealty and homage (Heng, 1990; reproduced in Malory, 2004, pp. 835–848, 836, 842). Guinevere comes across as imperious, impulsive, quick to anger, clever, witty, capricious, cruel, and arbitrary (E. Edwards, 1996, p. 49). She controls Lancelot's access to her, at one point sending him into exile. At the end of the book – emphasising her central role in the story – she accepts her responsibility for what happens to Arthur and the Round Table, repents of her sins, and dies a good death.

Malory's men both cherish and fear women. Women in *Le Morte Darthur* have magical and supernatural powers. The one male magician, Merlin, is removed early on and kept imprisoned by Nynyve, the Lady of the Lake. After the removal of Merlin, magic in the book is centred on Nynyve and on Morgan Le Fay, Arthur's sister. Both choose whom they love, using their magic to get their own way. They can be deceptive and malevolent but also protective of their male lovers. These characters, together with other events such as Lancelot's imprisonment by a group of queens who demand he

choose one of them to marry, suggest a sense of menace in female sexuality and in particular a male fear of the *desirous* female (the *desired* female being immured in a castle, places of security and good living) (E. Edwards, 1996, pp. 39–40; Whitaker, 1976, *passim*). When Morgan Le Fay seeks to take Aleysaundir le Orpheline as her lover, he expresses this distaste for female seduction with memorable directness:

> I had levir (rather) kut away my hangers (genitals) than I wolde do her ony suche pleasure. (Hodges, 2009, p. 26)

Women also have familiarity with drugs and powers of healing, healing knights of their wounds and using charms to keep them from harm. The most independent woman in the book, the sister of the Holy Grail knight Percival, and a woman who moves around without male protection, loses her life through giving blood to help a leper woman and is deemed worthy of 'worship', a word in the book mostly reserved for men but used three times in relation to her (Robeson, 2005, p. 116). At the end of the book, it is Morgan Le Fay, Nynyve, and two other queens who come in a ship to care for and take away the body of King Arthur.

ENGLAND AND BEYOND

The origins of the knights of the Round Table reflect the geography of the world as Malory would have known it in the latter part of the fifteenth century. The most important knights of the Round Table come from many different parts of the British Isles – Northumberland, Wales, Ireland, Cornwall, Orkney, and southern England – and, in the case of Lancelot and his kin, from France. Sir Urry, from Hungary, and Sir Palomides, a Saracen before his conversion to Christianity, are also admitted to the group. This idea of a community drawn from different territories reflects the way in which, early in the book, Arthur overcomes his enemies in the peripheral parts of Britain – areas hostile to royal control during Malory's own lifetime – and then goes on to assert his right to lands overseas in his successful war against Rome (Kelly, 2005, p. 81 and *passim*). Unlike his sources, Malory does not proceed immediately to Arthur's clash with Mordred, the outbreak of civil war, and the collapse of the Round Table, but inserts a long and glorious period in which Camelot is full of music, feasting, and celebration and knights joust and go off on quests.

Malory is also the first English Arthurian writer, outside the chronicles, to write the story of the whole of Arthur's reign and thus, in doing so, to draw attention to issues of nationhood (Riddy, 1996, p. 61).

During this period, 'Kynge Arthure regned, and he was hole kynge of Ingelonde, Walys, Scotlonde, and of many othir realmys' (Malory, 2004, p. 228). Whether Malory was creating this 'patriotic fantasy' in reaction against the weakening of English unity during the Wars of the Roses and the loss during his lifetime of almost all of England's lands in France is not clear (Hodges, 2010, pp. 562–565). Caxton, in his preface to the first printed edition in 1485, calls Arthur the 'fyrst and chyef of the thre best Crysten and Worthy (kings)', ranking him in this list above Charlemagne and seeing him as a symbol of English greatness (Caxton, 2004, p. 815). Caxton's edition came out in the year in which Henry VII, having defeated Richard III, launched the Tudor dynasty. Whether the preface was written before or after the accession of a Welsh king who claimed descent from Arthur is not known (McCarthy, 2005, pp. 6–9; Hodges, 2010, p. 560). The following year (1486), Henry VII's son and heir apparent was born, appropriately in Saint Swithun's priory in Winchester (Camelot), and named Arthur. One imagines that it might have helped Caxton – as much retailer as editor and printer – in the sale of the book.

England's longstanding involvement with France is apparent throughout the book, not just in the words in which it is written but also in the frequent references to French territories and the coming and going of knights across the English Channel. Lancelot and his kin are from Guienne, though arguably not 'French', and it is their French territories – free from English control, as they had become in reality by the time that Malory wrote – to which they return following their banishment by Arthur and Gawayne (Riddy, 1996, p. 61). One scholar astutely has seen *Le Morte Darthur* as a book that 'shows shifting and competing ways of imagining communities' in a period which saw changes taking place that likely impacted people's perceptions of their identity (Hodges, 2010, pp. 566–569).

Outside England, it has been suggested, Malory gave greater attention to the defence of Christendom against Islam than either his own sources or other English Arthurian romances, though not all scholars would agree (Field, 1993, p. 82; Goodrich, 2006, p. 12). Saracen knights are certainly quite visible in the book, most notably – and very un-historically – fighting on the side of the Romans during Arthur's continental war, but popping up elsewhere as well, not least in an attack on England. The only major figure of a Saracen in *Le Morte Darthur* is Sir Palomides who plays an important part in the story,

as an outsider who comes to be accepted into the Round Table and a man obsessed by his infatuation for Isode. Palomides fights duels with Isode's lover Trystram while, at the same time, having a great admiration for his rival as a paragon of chivalry. Palomides has been persuaded by the truth of the Christian faith and accepted Christ in his heart while delaying his baptism. His otherness (or 'alterity', if one prefers a grander word) has unsurprisingly attracted the attention of those keen to track down previously unidentified traces of Western 'orientalism' or apply postcolonial and subaltern theory to topics previously exempt from such scrutiny. The alterity of Palomides can be exaggerated. Given that he is a spurned lover, his sense of alienation from the world can also be explained, perhaps more plausibly, in terms that do not necessarily relate to Christian cultural hegemony. He was certainly one of the Round Table knights who has captured people's imagination in a sense that is far from negative. In Pisanello's Arthurian fresco in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, out of all the other possible Round Table knights who might have been chosen, it is an unmistakeable Palomides who stands alongside Tristan and Lancelot (Whitaker, 1990, plate 2).

In the Winchester manuscript, Malory does not use the word 'infydeles' (infidels) to describe Saracens. In Caxton's edition, it has been added to a description of the fighting between Arthur and the Roman emperor Lucius, in which the latter won a castle and 'stuffed hit with two hunderd sarasyns or Infydeles'. It is the first recorded use of the word in English, its insertion maybe a result of the heightened crusading fervour of the period following on from the capture of Byzantium by the Turks in 1453 (Roland, 2005).

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (1): MALORY IN TUDOR AND STUART TIMES

When Malory finished his book and asked his readers 'whan I am deed' to 'praye for my soule', he would not have been able to envisage large numbers of readers. He may indeed have wondered whether anyone beyond his prison walls would ever get to read it. He wrote and died before printing came to England at a time when the laborious task of copying a manuscript the length of *Le Morte Darthur* would have made its wide distribution difficult and likely to happen only slowly. Contemporary authors, whose academic writings are tossed on to the waters in a bottle in the hope that someone outside the academy might one day read them and be stirred by the contact

with another mind, should cast their thoughts back to the position of those who were only able to produce one copy at a time and be grateful.

What might have happened to the *Morte Darthur* if printing had not started up in London five years after Malory's death we cannot know. It might not have survived (only one incomplete manuscript copy of the work has done so from a period in which many manuscripts of some other works are still extant). Its future was assured, at least for a certain period following Caxton's first edition of 1485, an edition that the commercially minded editor did his best to promote by stressing its moral lessons and the presence in the book of 'many joyous and playsaunt hystoryes and noble and renoned actes of humanyté, gentylness, and chyvalryes' as well as the whole range of human qualities from 'curtosye … frendlynesse, hardynesse, love … (and) vertue' to 'cowardyse, murdre, hate … and synne' (Caxton, 2004, p. 817).

Caxton's edition was reprinted five times, suggesting that his instinct that there was sufficient interest in King Arthur to justify his decision to publish had been correct. The value of the Arthurian legend as a support to the new Tudor monarchy continued to be appreciated by Henry VIII, who had his own image painted onto the thirteenth-century Round Table on display in Winchester Castle in order to impress the visiting Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1522 (Pryor, 2005, pp. 38–39). Further editions of Caxton's version, illustrated with woodcuts, followed in 1498, 1529, 1559, 1582, and 1634 (A. S. G. Edwards, 1996, pp. 241–242). Chivalry and the qualities needed in *gentylmen,* now that fighting was not their main occupation, remained of interest in the Tudor period among the gentry and aristocracy. So too did the descent of England's monarchs from the legendary Arthur (Parins, 1988, pp. 4, 53; Merriman, 1973, p. 41; McCarthy, 2000, pp. 9–12). Evidence of impact on the literature of the period is, however, limited. Much has been made of possible influences on Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* though there is no firm evidence that they had read Malory as opposed to being aware of the Arthurian story and, in Spenser's case, using an Arthurian context to show the clash of virtue and vice (A. S. G. Edwards, 1996, p. 244; Merriman, 1973, p. 41; McCarthy, 2000, pp. 9–12).

The Tudor period saw the emergence of the first critical comments about *Le Morte Darthur.* There were a number of possible objections: the Arthurian legends were a throwback to more primitive times, which was the view of Erasmus; the historicity of Arthur was gravely in doubt; some of the stories, such as Lancelot and Guinevere and Trystram and Iseut, were immoral; and the book was steeped in Catholicism. The last two objections were made forcefully

by the Puritan Roger Ascham, tutor to Elizabeth I, in *The Scholemaster* (1570), in which he attributes the authorship of *Le Morte Darthur* to 'idle Monkes, or wanton Chanons (canons)' from the bad old days of 'Papistrie'. 'The whole pleasure' of the book, he says, 'standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye … those be counted the noblest Knightes … do kill most men without any quarell, and commit adoulteries by sutlest shiftes'. Ascham fears the 'toyes (tricks) the dayly readyng of (the *Morte Arthure*) may worke in the will of a young ientleman (gentleman), or a yong mayde (maid), that liueth welthelie and idelie', thus providing unwitting testimony to the book's popularity at that time within the aristocracy (Parins, 1988, pp. 56–57).

Interest in *Le Morte Darthur* appears to have waned in the early seventeenth century, with no new edition appearing between 1582 and 1634. James I's emphasis on being king of Great Britain continued to draw attention to Arthur, who had allegedly occupied a similar role and from whom James claimed descent. The seventeenth century also saw intellectual developments – an increasingly empirical outlook concerned with fact and truth and less interested in fancy, fiction, and myth – which predisposed people to be dismissive of the Middle Ages and of stories about kings who probably did not exist. *Le Morte Darthur* was not unique in being neglected. Whereas in the 125 years before 1602, there had been eleven editions of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* between 1602 and 1778, only three were published.

The Arthurian legend nonetheless continued to attract the attention of some of the seventeenth century's greatest writers, even if there is little clear evidence that they had read Malory. Two writers, Ben Jonson and Milton, projected Arthurian epics but decided in the end not to write them. Milton had eagerly read chronicles and romances about Arthur as a youth but came to see this as an unhealthy fascination. He doubted Arthur's historicity, distrusted the escapism implicit in romance, disliked Malory's Catholicism, and no doubt found his growing republicanism difficult to reconcile with the monarchical myth surrounding Arthur perpetuated by Stuart kings. Abandoning the idea of an Arthurian epic, he wrote *Paradise Lost* instead. Dryden, a monarchist, had no such qualms about Arthur and made him the hero of an opera he wrote for Charles II in 1684 but which was only performed, with music by Purcell, after the accession of William III. Dryden's Arthur is a British king fighting the Saxons, but, apart from this and the name, there is nothing to link him with the Arthurian legend as found in the medieval romances (Merriman, 1973, pp. 52–54, 56; Cooper, 2014).

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (2): THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY – KING ARTHUR'S LONG SLEEP

No new editions of *Le Morte Darthur* appeared in the eighteenth century, and, although by the end of the century, as Walter Scott reported, copies of the 1634 and earlier editions still remained in the hands of many collectors and antiquarians, access to them outside these circles had become difficult. By the early nineteenth century, a 'fair copy' of the 1578 edition was selling for 40 guineas and a copy of Caxton's original edition for the enormous sum of £325 (Merriman, 1973, pp. 129, 249). Apart from Henry Fielding's burlesque *The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great,* in which Tom Thumb appears at Arthur's court, and the occasional reference to Merlin, who seems to have survived longer in people's consciousness than Arthur, the eighteenth century was a dead period for any new reinterpretations of the Arthurian legend. It was a period in which the Middle Ages were held in contempt by many leading writers. For Pope in *An Essay on Criticism,* it was a period when 'the Monks finish'd what the Goths begun' (Pope, 1966, p. 83). David Hume saw the period between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance as 'a great trough of depression in which humanity wallowed for more than a thousand years a prey to ignorance, barbarism and superstition' (Merriman, 1973, p. 74). For Samuel Johnson, the nation was still in its 'infancy' during the Middle Ages. It was a period of 'barbarity' and 'childish credulity' in which 'plebeian learning' consisted of 'adventures, giants, dragons, and enchantments (and) *The Death of Arthur* was the favourite volume' (Parins, 1988, pp. 66–67).

And yet the seeds of the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival were already there in the second half of the century, with new editions of older works, especially Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* collections of old ballads, and a growing interest in the gothic. There was a new vindication of emotion and imagination, a concern for the primitive, and a sense that the non-classical past was more than just a quaint outgrown phase. It was as if what Basil Willey had called the 'steady decline of what has been called the tragic sense of life' in the eighteenth century had gone into reverse (Merriman, 1973, pp. 80–95, 113–115). Out of this emerged Romanticism, though little at first directly linked to medieval literature and little or nothing was Arthurian.

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (3): ARTHUR RETURNS TO ENGLAND, 1800–1830

The revival of interest in the Middle Ages was helped by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquarianism. Walter Scott was at the centre of this activity, reinterpreting ideals of chivalry and honour for a modern age and editing eight medieval romances, including the thirteenth-century metrical *Sir Tristrem,* which he patriotically misattributed to a Scot (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 91, 188, 280). Even more importantly, through his medieval novels, he generated a huge interest in the period. He had read *Le Morte Darthur,* which he described as written in 'pure old English' and 'told with a simplicity bordering upon the sublime' (Merriman, 1973, p. 129). He planned to produce a new edition but handed the task to the future Poet Laureate Robert Southey, for whom the book had been '(a) delight since I was a schoolboy', but who also put it aside for other projects. It was not therefore until 1816 and, independently of both Scott and Southey, that *Le Morte Darthur* was finally republished – this time, in two separate editions based on the edition of 1634. The following year, having in the meantime returned to the task, Southey brought out his own sumptuous quarto edition, based on the Caxton text, designed for a more affluent audience. The fact that three editions of the book came out within two years, following a gap of over 180 years, is an indication, at least on the part of publishers, that a new market for the work had made its appearance (Merriman, 1973, p. 129; Parins, 1988, pp. 93–102; A. S. G. Edwards, 1996, pp. 247, 250).

But the re-publication of *Le Morte Darthur* was slow to have any noticeable effect on English literature. None of the second generation of Romantic poets produced Arthurian works. Byron was contemptuous of medievalism, Shelley mentioned Merlin once, and Keats, while drawing on Chaucer, Dante, and Boccaccio, ignored Malory altogether. Despite this, there were more publications on Arthurian themes in the period 1800–1830 than in the whole eighteenth century. Scott drew on Malory, along with Chaucer and Spenser, for his not very successful *Bridal of Triermain* (1813), Thomas Love Peacock made a number of unsustained attempts to incorporate Arthurian references in his works, and Wordsworth, who had picked up one of the 1816 editions, used an Arthurian context for his deservedly lesser-known poem *The Egyptian Maid* (1835).

The infertility of the Arthurian legend for literary purposes during the early nineteenth century seems linked to an assumption on the part of writers that it needed to be related to historical fact rather than to 'the poetic truth of a non-existent world' (Merriman, 1973, p. 173). Only when the poetic potential of the story could be seized without having to worry about connecting it to historical reality would it be possible for the Arthurian legend to give birth once again to literary works of high quality. Romanticism in its early stages, although it produced no Arthurian works comparable to the later achievements of Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and the Pre-Raphaelites, prepared the ground for them by stimulating a new sensibility, one which privileged the poetic imagination as a way of approaching truths about the world.

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (4): VICTORIAN ENGLAND – THE ARTHURIAN GOLDEN AGE

Although many editions of *Le Morte Darthur* followed in the course of the nineteenth century, Tennyson and most people of his generation used one of the two editions published in 1816. One of these was largely unexpurgated, the other, like Southey's 1817 edition, significantly amended to make it more compatible with contemporary sensibilities about sexual and religious matters. One observer noted in 1824 – 'shame to say!' – the unexpurgated 1816 edition was selling better. Later nineteenth-century editions continued to be expurgated and became more so as the century went on (Parins, 1997, pp. 62, 65, 74).

The Victorian interest in *Le Morte Darthur* arose from a Romantic sensibility attracted to situations of high emotion, to the supernatural and mystical, to tragedy, to nature and the primitive, and to what is different and strange. This sensibility helped writers to look at the book as a stimulus to their own imagination, not as a chronicle for whose errors they had to apologise. The idea of a Round Table – a group of comrades bound by solemn oaths to support each other and dedicated to righting wrongs – appealed to Victorian ideals of masculinity. So too did Arthur's task of building a great kingdom and creating a society able to hold the line against the forces of evil. *Le Morte Darthur,* as we have seen, was a book with a strong ethical resonance. Gladstone, commenting generally on Arthurian romance, summed up its appeal to his contemporaries when saying:

> It is national: it is Christian. It is also human in the largest and deepest sense; and, therefore, though highly national, it is universal. (Taylor & Brewer, 1983, pp. 5, 127)

The Victorian period saw many literary works which drew on *Le Morte Darthur,* many of which are deservedly no longer read. Unlike previous centuries, however, *Le Morte Darthur* both appealed to some of the century's most talented writers and enabled them to produce some of their best work. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is the great literary achievement of the period, but Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult,* Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* and *The Tale of Balen,* and William Morris's Arthurian poems continue to be well worth reading.

For Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* was the project of a lifetime. Developing themes from his very popular Arthurian poems of the 1830s – *The Lady of Shalott, Morte d'Arthur, Sir Galahad,* and *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* – Tennyson published the first four of his *Idylls* in 1859, continuing to work on the others up to the publication of the final one in 1885. There were twelve *Idylls* altogether, a number hinting at a high ambition to follow in the footsteps of Virgil and Milton. After the death in 1861 of Prince Albert – a keen Arthurian – Tennyson, Poet Laureate for 42 years, added a dedication linking Albert to the poem:

> And indeed He seems to me
> Scarce other than my king's ideal knight,
> 'Who reverenced his conscience as his king;
> Whose glory was, redressing human wrong;
> Who spake no slander, no, nor listen'd to it;
> Who loved one only and who clave to her'. (Tennyson, 1928, p. 308)

In 1873, he also added an epilogue to Queen Victoria, which describes her late consort as 'ideal manhood closed in real man', implicitly comparing him to Tennyson's own idealised version of Arthur, a version he carefully distinguishes from that 'of Malleor's (Malory's) / one touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time / that hover'd between war and wantonness' (Tennyson, 1928, pp. 308, 475).

Le Morte Darthur is Tennyson's main source for the *Idylls,* though he also draws on the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion.* His highly symbolic Arthur departs

significantly from 'Malleor's', as do many elements in the story. References to incest and rape deemed shocking to Victorians are removed. Tennyson is also less sympathetic to the Grail quest: the pursuit of perfection and the achievement of grace are matters for this world, not reserved for the next.

Arthur's and Malory's hopes for a better world collapse in both versions, though the mood in the *Idylls* is often the darker of the two. In *The Last Tournament,* the tenth of the *Idylls,* Arthur wins a great victory and 'all the ways were safe from shore to shore / But in the heart of Arthur pain was lord' (Tennyson, 1928, p. 451).

In both Malory and Tennyson, Arthur's efforts to create a harmonious moral community end in failure, but in Tennyson, the pessimism is deeper. Arthur is heard moaning in his tent that he has found God 'in the shining of the stars' and 'the flowering of His fields / But in His ways with men I find Him not' (Tennyson, 1928, p. 467). This is a more fundamental doubting of the Christian picture of the world than Malory where, at the end of the book, the attempt to create a benign commonwealth having failed, there is still individual salvation to fall back on and preparation for this is possible through monastic life or a crusade. Where Malory and Tennyson agree is that even if the values they hold dear have been besmirched, this does not affect their truth. They remain for others to pick up and try again.

The dissemination of Tennyson's poetry in some parts of continental Europe is one reason why Malory's Arthurian stories came to be well-known among Europeans who had little or no idea that *Le Morte Darthur* had been their source. Tennyson was neither so widely read nor so highly regarded in continental Europe as Byron or Scott, despite which, parts of the *Idylls of the King* and other Arthurian poems had been translated by the end of the nineteenth century into French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, Russian, Polish, and Swedish. Tennyson's European reputation was enhanced in the 1860s with the appearance of Gustave Doré's evocative Gothic illustrations of scenes from the first few books of the *Idylls.* In France, Tennyson's reputation as a great contemporary poet even led to four poems from the *Idylls* being added in 1885 to the list of English literary works to be studied for the baccalaureate, an honour rarely given to a living author. The recent mapping of this Tennysonian reception across Europe illustrates vividly the way the afterlife of a book can go underground, hidden below other forces that are carrying it forward. Contact with Tennyson rarely involved contact with Malory, but this did not prevent the influence of a book written in unknown circumstances

in an unknown prison in the fifteenth century, and which only survived by the skin of its teeth, from continuing to shape people's imaginations – from Stockholm to Barcelona and from Paris to Warsaw – via the other works that, along the way, it had helped to inspire (Ormond, 2017, pp. 52, 63).[24]

For Matthew Arnold and Swinburne, it is the legend of Tristram and Isolde, linked to Arthur through Tristram's membership of the Round Table, that most drew their attention. The Victorians found it easier to deal with Isolde's adultery than Guinevere's because of its origins in a love potion over which she and Tristram had no control, though both sets of adulterous relationships enabled nineteenth-century writers to explore in an imaginary and historically remote context issues difficult to raise within a contemporary one. Matthew Arnold uses his *Tristram and Iseult* as a means of cautioning against the effects of unrestrained passion. He treats Tristram's marriage with the other Iseult, whom he marries – Iseult of Brittany – as consummated and, by giving them three children, is able to show the contrast between romantic adulterous passion on the one hand – Tristram's relationship with Iseult, wife of King Mark of Cornwall – and the missed chance of domestic married bliss on the other. The tragedy in Arnold's poem is as much that of Iseult of Brittany as of the traditional two lovers. Arnold's picture of unrequited love and of a wife and mother's outwardly stoical but internally pained lifelong endurance is a powerful and memorable one:

> And is she happy? Does she see unmov'd
> The days in which she might have liv'd and lov'd
> Slip without bringing bliss slowly away?
> Joy has not found her yet, nor ever well:
> Is it this thought that makes her mien so still,
> Her features so fatigued, her eyes, though sweet,
> So sunk, so rarely lifted save to meet
> Her children's? (Arnold, 1979, p. 232)

[24] One example of indirect reception leading to direct reception is the aristocratic Catalan illustrator and poet Alexandre de Riquer who, inspired by the pre–Raphaelites (who in their turn had been inspired by Tennyson's early Arthurian poems), went back to the original source in *Le Morte Darthur,* organising readings of this work for his fellow artists in the centre of Barcelona around the end of the nineteenth century (Ormond, 2017, p. 142).

Wagner wrote the libretto for his opera *Tristan und Isolde* a few years after Arnold published his poem in 1852, though its first performance in Munich was not until 1865 and in London until 1882. Arnold did not like the opera and felt that his version of the story was superior (Leavy, 1980, p. 1).

The Victorian poet who most lived the Arthurian legend was William Morris. As a boy, he had supposedly read all of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels by the age of seven. He had a suit of armour made for him and rode around Epping Forest wearing it. *Le Morte Darthur* was an early favourite. At Oxford in the 1850s, his enthusiasm for things medieval was shared by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. Morris bought Southey's luxurious copy of *Le Morte Darthur* for him and the impecunious Burne-Jones to share. It was loved so much by them that for Burne-Jones 'it became literally a part of himself' (Whitaker, 1990, p. 186). Inspired by Malory, the two friends planned to found a quasi-religious order of their own known as the Order of Sir Galahad. With Rossetti, they painted Arthurian murals on the walls of the new Gothic-style Oxford Union, which soon faded because of their ignorance of how paint should be applied to plaster (Taylor & Brewer, 1983, pp. 3, 22, 68–69, 128–135).

Like his Pre-Raphaelite friends, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and Holman Hunt, Morris was much influenced by Tennyson's early Arthurian poems and, in 1858, at the age of 24, published a group of six Arthurian poems of his own within a collection entitled *The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems.* Though working within a context provided by Malory, Morris nonetheless focused more on the psychological development of his characters and on visual detail. He is franker about sexual matters than other nineteenth-century Arthurians, and in Guinevere's passionate self-defence before the court in the collection's eponymous poem, it is difficult not to sympathise with her plight. In one of the poems, *Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery,* Morris uses an Arthurian context to explore with himself whether or not he ought to be ordained. In all these poems, Morris's focus is very much on individual destinies and – unlike Tennyson – less on the wider societal implications of the Arthurian story.

The impact of the nineteenth-century Arthurian Golden Age is most remembered today not through poems unlikely to be much read outside the scholarly communities studying them but through the country's art galleries and museums. Between 1860 and 1869 alone, fifty to sixty paintings on Arthurian subjects were exhibited. Eighty recorded pictorial versions (excluding

book illustrations) of *The Lady of Shalott* and its linked idyll *Lancelot and Elaine* were produced before 1914. Many survive.[25] Edward Burne-Jones, Henry Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Arthur Hughes, Aubrey Beardsley – to name only the most famous – all drew, in some cases extensively, on Arthurian themes in their art, sometimes influenced directly by Malory but mostly directly by Tennyson (and through him indirectly by Malory).[26] As well as The Lady of Shalott/Elaine (which is a version of the story of Elaine of Astolat in *Le Morte*), the other favourites were Arthur's final journey, Galahad and the quest for the Grail, and the legends of Tristram. Arthurian art took many forms: paintings, murals, sculptures, tapestries, stained glass windows, book illustrations, designs for furniture, and even staged art photography. One of the most ambitious projects, in which Prince Albert had been closely involved, was to decorate the Queen's Robing Room in the rebuilt Palace of Westminster – still in use today –with a series of frescoes depicting the chivalric virtues of hospitality, generosity, mercy, religion, and courtesy and a set of bas-reliefs in wood and stone illustrating the life of Arthur. All this was based closely on *Le Morte Darthur,* putting Malory, the book's author – an MP himself – and his work at the very

[25] Whitaker, 1990, pp. 214, 218. Whitaker suggests that the extraordinary popularity of The Lady of Shalott/Elaine of Astolat to Victorian males can perhaps be attributed to its 'iconic depiction of an 'ideal' relationship between the sexes' and the reassuring contrast between the handsome, successful masculine figure roaming the world outside the castle and the secluded, impregnable female immured inside it and devoted to domestic activities. The story's depiction of a beautiful young woman dying for love is to be seen, she suggests, as 'a sacrifice to male power and glory'. This may well be one reason for the subject's appeal and I would certainly not dismiss any of this, but the sources of people's tastes are complex. I have two caveats. The first is that we have no idea whether these paintings and drawings appealed more to men than they did to women. It is unlikely that any reliable evidence about this could be found. Second, for someone one of whose favourite poems has always been *The Lady of Shalott* what continues to draw me to it are its images of world weariness, despair, unrequited love and hope for release, images likely to resonate with human beings whatever their sex. *The Lady of Shalott* was much more widely translated into other European languages in the nineteenth century than any other Tennyson poem (Ormond, 2017, *passim*).

[26] Beardsley's black and white designs illustrated a two-volume edition of *Le Morte Darthur* published in 1893–1894. There is something rather sterile about them, 'a dream world in which joy and sorrow have no place', as Taylor and Brewer put it (Malory, 1893–1894, *passim*; Taylor & Brewer, 1983, p. 133). Illustrations in editions and adaptations of *Le Morte Darthur* that better capture the mood and tone of the text include those of Arthur Rackham and Catherine Donaldson (Malory, 1979; 1928).

centre of national life and symbolising the way in which, from having been largely forgotten, the Arthurian legend had somehow managed to reposition itself, at least for a time, as a significant element in people's sense of identity (Whitaker, 1990, pp. 176–183).

The omnipresence of Arthurian motifs annoyed some contemporaries. The cartoonist and author George du Maurier produced *A Legend of Camelot,* a parody in which a Lady of the Shalott lookalike 'left her tower, and wandered down / into the High Street of the town' and encounters there 'the pure Sir Galahad', who is distressed to find her 'but lightly clad' and wonders 'what would Arthur say' (du Maurier, 1898, p. 1). Robert Browning similarly mocked archaic tales of chivalry with lines such as 'Sir Olaf, the good knight, did don / His helm, and eke his habergeon' (Browning, 2005, p. 513; Taylor & Brewer, 1983, pp. 22–23). Gerard Manley Hopkins called Tennyson's *Idylls* 'charades from the Middle Ages', not because he did not take Malory and the ideals of chivalry seriously but because they were hugely important to him and he felt that Tennyson was not taking them seriously enough (Phillips, 2002, p. 241).

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (5): KING ARTHUR 1900 TO THE PRESENT DAY

The effect of all this Arthurian art and literature was such that, by 1913, a book on *The Teaching of English in Secondary Schools* could tell its teacher readers:

> let us assume a general knowledge of the Arthurian legend … we may in any case take for granted that (the pupils) have read the *Idylls of the King* wholly or in part; and that their work has included the bulk of Malory's text in some judicious selection. (McCausland, 2017, p. 5)

This statement implies an extraordinary level of familiarity with Malory across the nation's schools. A similar impression emerges from a 1921 inquiry into the teaching of English in England, which listed the books in circulation in London elementary schools. In what it called Class A, 'those in great and steady demand', third on the list, after tales from Shakespeare and *Robinson Crusoe,* were 'Arthurian legends'. Even if many children retained only a hazy impression of what they had been taught, there seems to have been a level of diffusion of knowledge about *Le Morte Darthur* exceeded neither previously nor since (McCausland, 2017, p. 12).

Bowdlerised selections from *Le Morte Darthur* were widely available and many were directed specifically at elementary and secondary schools. One made suggestions about how Malory might provide the basis for a term's work in English. Another, published in 1908, saw Malory's knights providing role models for boys while girls would learn how to behave in such a way as to be worthy of the same respect shown to ladies in the *Morte* (McCausland, 2017, pp. 2, 6, 16). Twentieth-century Round Table adventures for children could also be found well outside the Anglosphere, the writer Alberto Manguel remembering a greencovered series of books that included Arthurian stories, which he encountered as a child in the 1950s and 1960s in a stationery shop in Buenos Aires (Manguel, 1996, p. 225).

This popularity of *Le Morte Darthur* with educators in England arose from perceptions of its suitability for the development of character rather than of literary taste or historical understanding. The study of the book in schools focused on the psychology of the characters and the ethical predicaments they faced, on the assumption that the issues these threw up were timeless. The knightly qualities of generosity, courtesy, helpfulness, and kindliness were felt to be as appropriate in the twentieth century as in the fifteenth. Malory was also seen as a suitable subject of study because of his Englishness, because he wrote at the time of the emergence of modern English speech, and because *Le Morte* could be read as a narrative of national pride and thus a potential stimulus to the development of a national identity (McCausland, 2017, *passim*).

It must have been in part because of this diffusion of *Le Morte Darthur* across the nation's schools, on top of the prominence of Arthurian legends in Victorian literature and art, that Malory continued to be an important stimulus to literary creation in Britain during the rest of the first half of the twentieth century and to attract some of its major and most innovative talents. The story of Tristram and Isolde was of particular interest during the early part of this period, with Arthur Symons writing a Symbolist play, *Tristan and Iseult*; Thomas Hardy, a verse play, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*; and John Masefield – the third Poet Laureate to make use of Arthurian material – another verse play and a couple of poems on the same theme. Perhaps the most famous, if not the most accessible, use of the story was in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), in which references to the two lovers run as a theme throughout the novel, inspiring memorable lines such as:

> All the birds of the sea they trolled out rightbold when they smacked the big kuss of Trustan with Usolde.
> (and) … Tristy's the spry young spark
> That'll tread her and wed her and bed her and red her. (Joyce, 1950, p. 383; Taylor & Brewer, 1983, p. 274)

The Grail legend and linked idea of a 'waste land' placed under a curse that needed to be lifted appealed, most famously, to T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* but also to Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, J. C. Powys, and David Jones. J. C. Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) can lay claim to be the greatest Arthurian novel of the twentieth century, the author returning to Arthurian themes, though in a minor vein this time, in both *Maiden Castle* (1937) and *Porius* (1951). David Jones is perhaps the twentieth century's most Malorian author, someone familiar with *Le Morte* as a child and later through his friend Eric Gill, artist and sculptor, who read the book aloud to his family. As an Anglo-Welshman David Jones saw *Le Morte* as a book that could resonate with the whole of Britain. He was much influenced by the comradeship of the Round Table, which he saw replicated in that of the trenches among ordinary soldiers in which he had served during the First World War. Arthur for him was a timeless reference point enabling him to write about his own times while standing back from them. His drawings and watercolours are similar to his writings in their juxtaposition of large numbers of images that the viewer (like the reader) has to disentangle, decipher, and turn into new meanings (Whitaker, 1990, pp. 317–325 and plate 35; Gossedge, 2019). It is an indication of the fertility of the Arthurian legend and, more specifically, *Le Morte* in the case of David Jones, that it held such an appeal for some of the century's most experimental artists.

The second half of the twentieth century opened with the publication of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), which did much to revive interest in the Arthurian legends, both in Britain and, possibly even more so, in the USA. The rest of the century, however, did not live up to the passionate engagement with these legends, and with *Le Morte Darthur,* that had marked the first half. The reasons for this are similar to the ones that apply to some of the other works under consideration: the sense that the past does not have much to teach us, the decline of Christianity, the desacralisation of our view of the world, the growth of cultural diversity, the weakening of national identity, the dominance of the visual, and the availability of other

forms of entertainment that make it less and less likely that people will devote sufficient time to reading long and difficult literary texts.

Meanwhile children's versions and popular adult versions of varying quality abound, Merlin meets and greets at Disneyland, and bouncy inflatable Camelot Castles continue to appear at events and in town centres in the summer holidays oblivious of their role in the terminal stage of a centuries-old process of cultural transmission.[27]

THE AFTERLIFE OF LE MORTE DARTHUR (6): KING ARTHUR IN THE LAND OF THE YANKEES

England's nineteenth-century medievalism also reached the USA, mostly via the novels of Walter Scott, reinforced later in the century by the poems of Tennyson. Although Emerson showed an interest in Arthurian tales, few others did so before the final part of the century. Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Chivalry, or Legends of King Arthur* (1858) was widely read, as was Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur* (1880) based on *Le Morte.* The latter looks as if it was the version of Malory read by the young T. S. Eliot growing up in St Louis, who remembered it being 'in my hand when I was a child of eleven or twelve. It was then, and perhaps has always been, my favourite book' (Eliot, 1934, p. 278; A. S. G. Edwards, 1996, p. 250). But the most notable late-nineteenth-century US literary response to *Le Morte* was not a reverent adaptation of an ancient text but an attack on aristocracy, monarchy, despotism, organised religion, and superstition through the medium of a satirical version of the medieval world and literary medievalism. This was Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889), whose very existence was evidence of the extent of the vogue for Arthuriana it was lampooning. Twain had been encouraged to read *Le Morte* by a friend who said, 'You'll never lay it down until you have read it cover to cover', and although Twain's aim was to mock the medieval world and lampoon the book's language, he was unable to withhold his admiration for Malory's 'master hand' (Taylor & Brewer, 1983, p. 170; Twain, 1986, pp. 14, 94–95, 109–113).

[27] The last bouncy Camelot Castle – replete with turrets, a knight in armour and barred dungeon windows – was seen by the author in the summer of 2018, appropriately enough in the grounds of the parish church of Kingston upon Thames, site of the coronation of early English kings.

As a time travel novel in which the contemporary world intrudes into the medieval one, *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* is full of humour and adventure stories, which all but the most earnest Malorian aficionados might be expected to appreciate: the Round Table Stock Exchange; the baseball team made up of knights named in *Le Morte*; parodies of tournaments and knightly quests to rescue damsels; expeditions sent out 'holy grailing' without having a clue what they were looking for; Sir Lancelot and five hundred knights arriving on bicycles to rescue Arthur from imminent execution. But it is also a serious book. Twain told his English publisher that it 'was not written for America, it was written for England', against the kind of culturally critical attitudes towards the USA of people like Matthew Arnold and in favour of liberty, republicanism, and the cause of the common man. This may have been his original intention, but in its later chapters, the book also turns into a criticism of modernity, with its Gatling guns and explosives and its ruthless determination to use these against those standing in the way of 'progress', and ultimately, like *Le Morte Darthur* itself, becomes an illustration of the presence of evil in human affairs and the need for a compensating Ideal (Taylor & Brewer, 1983, pp. 172–173). Twain's novel inspired a musical in 1949 (with Bing Crosby), a cartoon, *Connecticut Rabbit in King Arthur's Court,* and a Walt Disney film, *The Spaceman and King Arthur* (1979). Walt Disney productions have also included *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and, testimony to continuing public knowledge of things Arthurian, *Avalon High* (2010).

Twain was not alone in borrowing from Malory. A number of Arthurian plays were written or performed in the USA around the beginning of the twentieth century. One of them, Henry Irving's production of J. Comyns Carr's *King Arthur,* clocked up 74 performances on tour in America following a run of 105 in London (Foulkes, 2008, p. 66). The first quarter of the century also saw what have been described as the 'most distinguished Arthurian works yet produced in America', the Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristan poems of Edward Arlington Robinson. These show influences from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde,* which Robinson enormously admired, and Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (A. S. G. Edwards, 1996; Taylor & Brewer, 1983, p. 179). It has indeed been suggested that, despite the huge contrast between American ideals and values and the world of *Le Morte* Americans were more creative than Britons in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in adapting and reinterpreting the Arthurian legend (Helbert, 2019).

Perhaps the most enthusiastic American Arthurian was John Steinbeck. His early comic short novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935), which helped to launch his

literary career, parallels *Le Morte Darthur* in its depiction of a group of Californian *paisanos* in Monterey after the end of the First World War, friends who through a series of chances find themselves living together in a house 'not unlike the Round Table' and whose friendship, 'not unlike' that of the Arthurian knights, 'flourished and grew to be an organization beautiful and wise'. Direct Arthurian references disappear after the first couple of pages, but notions of honour and loyalty, ambivalent relationships between the sexes, moral dilemmas, acts of sacrifice, and incidents of backsliding, together with an ending which sees the collapse of the fellowship but a reassertion of its ethics, provide a Malorian palimpsest to the novel, which, for those familiar with the two texts, adds value to both (Steinbeck, 1937, pp. 9–10). Twenty years later, using the Winchester version of *Le Morte Darthur,* he reworked a few of the books into what he called 'plain present-day speech'. His interest in Malory went back to his childhood when an aunt gave him a copy of *Le Morte,* at whose black print, a reluctant reader, he stared with hatred, only to find that, when he opened it, a new world beckoned. What he liked most at first were the old words and the old spellings, which gave him a new and secret language. 'Perhaps a passionate love for the English language', he wrote, 'opened to me from this one book'.[28] Later, it was the book's moral tensions that helped him to make better sense of himself and his own world.

> And in that (ancient) scene were all the vices that ever were – and courage and sadness and frustration, but particularly gallantry – perhaps the only single quality of man that the West has invented. I think my sense of right and wrong, my feeling of noblesse oblige, and any thought I may have against the oppressor, came from this secret book. It did not outrage my sensibilities as nearly all the children's books did. … If I could not choose my way at the crossroads of love and loyalty, neither could Lancelot. I could understand the darkness of Mordred because he was in me too; and there was some Galahad in me, but perhaps not enough. (Steinbeck, 1977, pp. xi–xiii)

[28] The version read by the nine-year-old Steinbeck was Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur,* an abridged edition of the Caxton text, which, unlike Steinbeck's own version, kept most of the fifteenth-century words while modernising their spellings (Mooney, 2010, pp. 70–75).

WHY READ LE MORTE DARTHUR TODAY?

The impact *Le Morte Darthur* had on Steinbeck as a boy is reason enough to pick up the book and see whether it has a similar impact on oneself. The first thing that struck Steinbeck was the language, the old words, the unfamiliar spellings. For some, this might be a bar to getting any further into the text. These people may wish to start with the Oxford World Classics edition, which has modernised the spelling, made everything *look* familiar at a glance, and glossed unfamiliar words at the foot of the page (Malory, 2004). It is close to the original, except for the removal of some of the more repetitive passages. For those who think that strangeness is attractive and overcoming initial difficulties a challenge to be relished, the unabridged Norton edition should be attempted (Malory, 2004). The difference, in the same piece of text, is as follows:

> Then Sir Lancelot never after ate but little meat, nor drank, till he was dead; for then he sickened more and more, and dried and dwindled away. For the bishop nor none of his fellows might not make him to eat, and little he drank, that he was waxen a cubit shorter than he was, that the people could not know him. (Malory, 1998, p. 524)

> Thenne Syr Launcelot never after ete but lytel mete, nor dranke, tyl he was dede; for than he seekened more and more, and dryed and dwyned awaye – for the Bysshop nor none of his felowes myght not make hym to ete, and lytel he dranke, that he was waxen a kybbet shorter than he was, that the peple coude not knowe hym. (Malory, 2004, p. 695)

The Norton edition brings one closer to the Winchester manuscript by putting in bold most of the proper names (in the original, they are in red) and by increasing the size of initial letters at the beginnings of new sections. With its high-quality thin paper, wide margins, and the sense (at nearly 1,000 pages) which it conveys of an invitation to many weeks of leisurely reading, this edition is my favourite. Its front cover illustration of the Earl of Warwick ('the Kingmaker'), whom Malory only *may* have known personally, which at first I found a strange choice, is now a reminder every time I pick up the book of how little we know about the author and thus of a certain mystery at the book's core. The Norton edition also gives guidance as to how late Middle

English should be pronounced. Reading passages aloud, as they would have been by many of the book's earliest readers, gives one a stronger appreciation of the power of Malory's language. As one of our other authors, Walter Scott, writing of Chaucer 'or any other ancient poet', put it, 'the novice may be easily persuaded to approach 'the well of English undefiled' … if by reading aloud to him' he can be shown 'that only about one-tenth of the words are in fact obsolete' (Scott, 1998, p. 10).

But it is not just the simplicity and beauty of the language, widely (if not universally) praised, that makes *Le Morte Darthur* worth reading. It is also, as Steinbeck says, the way it addresses perennial issues of right and wrong and good and evil and does so against a backdrop that is so different from our contemporary world that the contrast, far from obscuring these issues, highlights the essential similarities behind the differences. It is because of this that, in periods when there is a sense that all is not well with the world – the slow fading of faith in Victorian times, the generation blighted by the First World War – a book by an author writing in prison at a time of civil war and national defeat has been able to inspire so many new works of art. Given the world of the twenty-first century, faced with challenges unimaginable to Malory, Tennyson and David Jones, the return of 'the once and future king' to our contemporary artistic scene may be long overdue.

FURTHER READING

If reading *Le Morte Darthur* arouses interest in the medieval world out of which it emerged, and in the idea, origins, and characteristics of chivalry, there is only one book to which one should turn, and that is *Chivalry* by the late Maurice Keen, my medieval history tutor at Balliol College and, decades later, Fellow of Winchester College during my time there as Headmaster. He was a wise and gracious man who exemplified the core knightly qualities that Malory wrote about and that retain their validity in a very different world. The book is magnificently illustrated with images of tournaments and battles (Keen, 1984).

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

Anyone who has worked their way through the complete unamended *Morte Darthur* – 700 pages of the Winchester text in the octavo Norton edition –

as I have now done on three occasions, may not have time to throw some much-needed light on other 'neglected works'.

I cannot imagine that many people these days have the inclination to read all twelve books of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King.* My own dark blue leather-bound copy of Tennyson's poetical works, now fallen into two parts through age and use, is dated 1928. It must have been there on one of the two or three bookshelves of the small, terraced house on the day I was born in Stoke on Trent in 1943 at a time of blackouts, gas masks, and air-raid warnings. It has followed me across at least ten of the houses in which I have subsequently lived, though as a quintessentially English work, never crossed the Channel with me when I went to work in Spain and Switzerland. I am not sure when it came into my possession. It has my mother's name on its first page. She would have been seventeen at the time and about to leave school for office work. It is very likely that she would have learned about Malory while at school. She may even have read there Tennyson's short Arthurian poems or some of the *Idylls,* and maybe enjoyed them sufficiently to buy or have bought for her this edition of Tennyson's poetical works. She has not been around for a very long time so I can no longer ask her the questions about this – and about many other things – that keep on coming into my mind. I first read the *Idylls* after my initial reading of Malory and found the interaction between the two works endlessly fruitful. Like *Le Morte Darthur,* it is one of the great works of English literature and deserves to be more widely read (Tennyson, 1938).

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5

JOHN BUNYAN'S THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS (1678)

FROM 'THE BOOK OF BOOKS' TO 'SPECTACULARLY UNTRENDY'

In her brilliant book on the way in which the term 'Vanity Fair', used by Bunyan to describe an episode in *The Pilgrim's Progress,* has entered into the general consciousness, Kirsty Milne describes how, although 'Vanity Fair' has continued to live, acquiring across the centuries a host of new associations, the writer who first coined it, John Bunyan, 'has all but vanished from contemporary bookshelves'. She quotes the Bunyan scholar Allen Michie, who in 1998 described *The Pilgrim's Progress* as 'currently one of the most unpopular works among English literature's greatest bestsellers and one of the most spectacularly untrendy works in the canon' (Milne, 2015, pp. 5, 10).

The book has not disappeared from view. Leading publishers continue to produce excellent editions, and there is a huge academic Bunyan industry that never sleeps. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is also far from forgotten among Christians and, having gained a global audience for itself early on, has hardly 'vanished from (the) contemporary bookshelves' of the world's estimated 2.2 billion Christians, most of whom live outside the Western world – an important aspect of Bunyan's reception that many Western academic commentators on Bunyan seem to neglect.[29] Materials even exist to support its study within schools, though you will not find it prescribed either for England's national curriculum or for any of its national examinations.[30] Outside a few narrow circles, at least in the Western world, however, there is little sign that Bunyan is still read. A survey in the late 1980s in the USA – where *The Pilgrim's Progress*

[29] Versions in Spanish, Urdu, Chinese, Swahili, and Xhosa are all available online at the time of writing. Bunyan's global dissemination is discussed by Isabel Hofmeyr in *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (2003).

[30] Bunyan is named in England's national curriculum programme of study for 14- to 16-year-olds as one of a long list of writers who are part of pre-twentieth century 'English literary heritage', and some of whose texts should be chosen for study.

was once a bestseller – showed that not even 1 in 7 American 17-year-olds could answer correctly a simple multiple-choice question on the book, a response within the scope of random guessing (Greaves, 2002, p. 623). It would be surprising if it were otherwise in a largely post-Christian and de-mystified Western world, in the case of a book, whatever its literary merit, which is addressed to Christians struggling with their sense of sin, uncertainty about salvation, and hopes and fears concerning life after death.

And yet, for two centuries and more since its publication in 1678, the situation could not have been more different. After Shakespeare and the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* can make a good claim to have been the world's most widely circulated book and, after the Bible, the one with the widest *popular* appeal across all classes of society. The book was an instant success, going through 22 editions in English by 1700, 70 by 1800, and over 1300 by 1938. Many abridged and adapted versions appeared in the form of small, cheap booklets, which were accessible to a wide range of the population and sold in increasing numbers in a country experiencing both population growth and improved literacy (40% of adult men and 25% of women in England being estimated as literate by 1700) (Mitch, 2004, p. 344). These booklets were mostly sold by itinerant pedlars wandering through the towns and villages accompanied by their packhorses, a custom which continued well into the nineteenth century (Fischer, 2003, pp. 247–248). *The Pilgrim's Progress* also quickly became an international bestseller. Between 1682 and 1996, there were 125 Dutch editions alone. It was translated into over 200 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Maori, and many African and native American languages. It was recast as verse, turned into a play, set to music, and made available in phonetic and braille versions. It has spawned jigsaws, picture puzzles, colouring books, wall charts, board games, prints, busts, medallions, and wallpaper designs. One man in Victorian times even landscaped his Cheshire garden into a Bunyan theme park. This still exists today and is open to the public: the tour starts in the car park, a reclaimed swamp named after Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond' (Greaves, 2002, pp. 611–613, 618–619; Dunan-Page, 2010, p. 3; Hofmeyr, 2010, p. 163).

In the late seventeenth century and for much of the eighteenth century, Bunyan's appeal was largely to those outside 'polite society'. Elite taste, by and large, did not extend to an appreciation of the demotic language of an unordained tinker who had rude things to say about the rich and powerful, most of whom he saw as destined for Hell. The very fact that someone of his background, who 'never went to school to Aristotle or

Plato', was daring to inform and guide large numbers of people about the state of their souls was in itself socially subversive (Keeble, 2010, p. 19; Hill, 1988, p. 371). *The Pilgrim's Progress* might be a fancifully allegorical and suitably exhortatory book for children but was not to be recommended to educated adults. This began to change as a result of the rise of Methodism – whose founder, John Wesley, published a condensed and adapted version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* – and of the late eighteenth-century evangelical revival in the Church of England, to the extent that by Victorian times, Bunyan had become accepted as an important figure in the English literary canon (Fischer, 2003, p. 260). The Romantic movement, with its stress on originality, authenticity, native genius, and strong feeling, also led to a re-evaluation in literary circles. A crucial event in the evolution of Bunyan's reputation was the publication in 1830 of a new edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* edited by Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate. The work was favourably reviewed by leading critics, including the novelist Sir Walter Scott and the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay. *The Pilgrim's Progress* had become a national treasure (Milne, 2015, p. 85; Greaves, 2002, p. 626; Smith, 2010, p. 36; Mason, 2010, p. 152; Sharrock, 1976, p. 21).

At the same time, Bunyan's social radicalism, with its origins in the English Civil War, was proving an inspiration to the English working-class movement, for which it has been seen as one of two 'foundation texts' (the other being Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*) (Greaves, 2002, p. 622; Mason, 2010, p. 152). Autobiographies of nineteenth-century working men and of future leaders of the labour movement are full of references to *The Pilgrim's Progress.* One has a sense of the book having been read throughout the length and breadth of the land, from Orkney crofts to the East End of London, in blacksmiths' smithies, shepherds' cottages, and weaving and mining communities. Some of the versions will have been abbreviated, many will have been illustrated (and it is often the vivid images that were remembered in retrospect), some will have been given as Sunday School prizes, and many will have been second-hand. A busy trade in second-hand versions of popular books was very much a feature of nineteenth-century towns, with most places having at least one bookstall in the market square. Henry Mayhew in the middle of the century found that the majority of customers at London's bookstalls were working men (Rose, 2001, pp. 120–121). In Langloan, a weaving village in Lanarkshire, 'most homes' in the village had a copy, according to Janet Hamilton, a self-educated working woman (Rose, 2001, pp. 33, 49, 73, 95, 102, 105, 117, 132, 372, 374, 376, 394).

A Chartist version of the book, *The Political Pilgrim's Progress,* was published in 1839, though, for the Chartist leader Thomas Cooper, it was 'the immortal *Pilgrim's Progress*' itself that was 'my book of books' and that was clearly read as a subversive text (Rose, 2001, p. 105; DeCook & Galey, 2012, p. 131). The socialist journalist Robert Blatchford, who had learnt most of the book by heart at the age of ten, saw its message as profoundly political:

> Mr. Pliable we all know; he still votes for the old Parties. Mr. Worldly Wiseman writes books and articles against Socialism, Mr Facing-both-ways is never absent from the House, and I think Mr. By-ends is become the guiding spirit of the British Press. (Rose, 2001, pp. 105–106)

As late as the First World War, Emrys Daniel Hughes, from a Welsh mining family, who had read it as an adventure story in childhood, re-read it when in prison for refusing conscription and at once realised what a subversive book it was:

> Lord Hategood could easily have been in the Government. I had talked with Mr Worldly Wiseman and had been in the Slough of Despond and knew all the jurymen who had been on the jury at the trial of Hopeful at Vanity Fair … Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was one of the great books that showed great understanding of the life of man. (Rose, 2001, p. 105)

The seeds of Bunyan's dismissal from 'course-lists and bookshelves', however, had already been planted long before the reputation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* had reached its acme (Milne, 2015, pp. 137–138). Throughout the Western world from the mid-eighteenth century onwards – or, so at least the evidence suggests, in England, Germany, and the US – two important trends were apparent. First, people read more books than they had ever done. This did not necessarily mean that they spent more time reading, just that they read more extensively and, on the whole, less intensively, having far more books now with which to fill up their time. Second, people's taste in reading shifted, evidence from a sample of late eighteenth-century libraries showing that 70–80% of the books borrowed were light fiction, 10% biography, history, and travel; and less than 1% religion. Although the evidence is partial, and compatible with intensive religious reading outside libraries (not least the Bible), it reinforces the view that what was happening from the second half of the eighteenth century was what Max Weber summed up as a process of

'disenchantment'. The move is towards a world in which talk of angels and devils, the temptations of Satan, the sense of God's hand behind events, the flooding of the soul with the saving grace of Jesus Christ, the sound of God's voice speaking to one across a field – all features of Bunyan's writings – begin to seem less and less plausible (Darnton, 1992; Bunyan, 1966, pp. 32–33).

The growth of mass circulation newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century provided another source of distraction. A report in England in 1886 concluded that, as a result, 'now it is to be feared that very few working men and women read *The Pilgrim's Progress*' (Greaves, 2002, p. 622). Around the same time, the historian J. A. Froude, in a biography full of admiration for Bunyan, described his religious doctrine as having been 'a fire from heaven shining like a sun in a dark world', while adding that 'with us the fire has gone out; in the place of it we have but smoke and ashes' (Froude, 1888, p. 56).

But the influence of Bunyan, and the omnipresence of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* were slow to fade, not least because it was a book which, even if less read by adults, had often been encountered in childhood at school (Rose, 2001, p. 149). The letters and diaries of many First World War soldiers show how the remembered experiences of Christian in 'The Slough of Despond' and 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death' (in Part I of the book) resonated with their own wartime struggles. By the time of the Second World War, these were images which appeared no longer to have a place in the memories of a new generation. The tercentenary of Bunyan's birth in 1928 brought forth a spate of new biographies – twenty in all – but both this and the events that commemorated the tercentenary of his death sixty years later in 1988 were largely tributes to an unquestionably important historical phenomenon rather than to a writer with a continuing major impact on contemporary readers' lives.

The legacy of the long reign of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in my own case is an accumulated family library of four copies of the book. There were once five but a small thick blue one fell apart and was thrown away at some stage. Two were gifts from my parents, one inscribed with my name in my mother's handwriting, the other inscribed by myself as a child with my full name in curious curly capital letters, which I have no recollection of ever using. Looking at it now, I can see why (like the historian Christopher Hill and doubtless many others) I did not read it but, in my case, looked only at the illustrations: Christian in the Slough of Despond, before the Cross, in a suit of armour, and wading through the River of Death that leads him to the Celestial City (Hill, 1988, p. 3). The typeface is close, the binding cheap

and unattractive, and the overall appearance as gloomy as the Valley of the Shadow of Death itself. The illustrations, which are few and far between, dry up completely once one gets to Part II, which recounts the separate and later quest of Christiana, Christian's wife, an editorial omission that can only regrettably reinforce the – not wholly wide of the mark – feminist reading of the book as, at least in part, a reinforcement of patriarchy.

The other two old editions (one dated 1910 from a Scottish publisher 'by appointment to the late Queen Victoria' and the other with a preface dated 1864) are much more attractive. One, with its binding falling apart, was probably inherited by my mother from her father along with his complete set of Dickens (and little else). The other one, which my mother must have picked up from a second-hand bookseller, was owned by someone who (like me, its owner now for thirty years) never got round to cutting most of its pages. One wonders how many uncut copies like this are still lying around in bookshelves, attics, and bookshops. One also wonders, both of this and the other books in this volume, what proportion of their owners (i) have read them to the end; (ii) have given up reading them at some stage and at what stage; (iii) have merely dipped into them; (iv) have only become familiar with them and their authors because they have them on their shelves (or now in their e-reader's library), without ever having got round to reading them; (v) have tagged on to them all sorts of extraneous associations, which have little to do with them; or (vi) can no longer recall whether they have ever either read or possessed them. These are important questions if one is trying to find out how a work has been 'received', questions that histories of 'reception' – which is far too passive a word – sometimes ignore.

My fourth copy is the Penguin version edited by the great Bunyan scholar Roger Sharrock, with Blake's powerful watercolour drawing of Christian and Apollyon, the demon of spiritual doubt, on the cover, and it is this copy which I read for the first time in the late 1980s and have since re-read. Its main disadvantage is the absence of the innumerable biblical cross-references that Bunyan included in the original edition. An example of how publishing and editorial decisions can radically change how books are received, this is a serious and fundamental omission as it removes from almost every page of the book the constant reminder that the Bible for a Christian is *the* fount of knowledge and that the Pilgrim's story must at all points be seen in this light. By omitting these cross-references from *The Pilgrim's Progress,* one changes the whole way one reads the book –to one profoundly different from what

Bunyan intended. Readers are of course free to do this, but in doing so, they need to be clear that what they have done is to turn it into a new text.

At least one of my copies of the book has been put into and taken out of packing cases nine or ten times as I have moved over the years between England and Scotland and between one part of England and another. With each move, they have been both physically placed on a new set of shelves and at the same time re-arranged in my memory as a text with a particular history and a particular set of implications for my life.[31]

My mini-library is a microcosm of the story of attention and neglect I have been trying to recount.

WHO WAS JOHN BUNYAN?

Christopher Hill points out that John Bunyan (1628–1688) was 'the first major English writer who was neither London based nor university educated'. He visited London frequently in the later part of his life and was buried in the Dissenters' burial ground in Bunhill Fields in Islington, the site marked by an impressive monument – illustrated by two scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* – which seems almost to co-opt him into a literary establishment to which in life he did not belong. He came from a poor family near Bedford, where he continued to live for most of the rest of his life. His father was a brazier or tinker (an itinerant mender of metal pots and pans). Although tinkers were social outcasts, Bunyan's family were descended from yeomen and small traders and as householders had a higher status than the homeless poor (Turner, 1980, p. 97). He attended a local school for a short time but was taken away to help his father in his work. His lack of formal education showed in his writings and, although often sneered at by his social superiors, helps to account for their extraordinary vigour, clarity, simplicity, and directness. His reading was limited but impressive – Martin Luther's voluminous and intellectually demanding preface to St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians being

31 Walter Benjamin describes the memories and feelings evoked by unpacking one's books in 'Unpacking My Library' (1969, pp. 59–67). A more recent exploration of a personal library as autobiography can be found in Alberto Manguel's *Packing My Library: An Elegy and Ten Digressions* (2018). Theodore Dalrymple in *These Spindrift Pages* recounts the memories evoked while sorting through the books in a large personal library, which he hopes to finish cataloguing before he dies (2023).

a favourite – and he made excellent use of it in his many writings (Bunyan, 1966, p. 43). 58 separate writings have survived, most of which are non-fiction. They include a widely read autobiography, two allegories (*The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*), a kind of early novel in dialogue (*The Life and Death of Mr Badman*), a verse collection for children, arousing sermons, works of evangelical piety, conduct manuals, and works of theological controversy (Sharrock, 1980, pp. 50–51).

But Bunyan was first and foremost a preacher. After service in the New Model Army fighting for the parliamentary cause during the Civil War of the 1640s, he returned to Bedford and joined one of the town's Dissenting congregations. As a young man, he had led a dissipated life, but after a great deal of soul-searching, which sometimes left him in a state of despair, came to see the error of his ways and to understand that the one thing that mattered was salvation. Bunyan became a predestinarian Calvinist, believing that only some (the elect) would be saved, that man's salvation – the fruit of Jesus's death on the Cross – was a free gift from God, that nothing one did could alter one's pre-determined fate, but that one must have faith in Christ's redeeming power, love Him as one's Saviour, live a holy life, and look for signs that one was in receipt of His grace. The painful spiritual journey that led to Bunyan's conversion is vividly described in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners,* which provides an autobiographical backdrop to his allegorical and fictional account of Christian's conversion experience in *The Pilgrim's Progress.*

Bunyan's formative years as a young man coincided with the religious and political ferment of the Civil War and the Commonwealth and Protectorate. The years after 1640 had seen an explosion of printing, much of it Puritan, and a degree of religious and publishing freedom previously unknown. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 in the person of Charles II brought this to an end. Bunyan insisted on continuing to preach to unauthorised assemblies outside the re-established Church of England, thus making the choice of remaining as a 'sectarian' rather than as a Puritan seeking to reform the Church from within (G. Campbell, 1980, p. 251). As a result, he soon found himself in prison. Here he was to remain, except for short periods of parole, for the next twelve years.

In 1672, he was elected pastor of his church in Bedford and, benefitting from a period of greater toleration, released from prison. He continued in this role, preaching also to many other congregations, and with his writing, until his death in 1688.

A STYLISTIC HYBRID

It was in prison where, in 1668–1670, Bunyan wrote Part I of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. References to dungeons, chains, and cages echo through the pages of the book (Zim, 2014, pp. 126–128). The book begins:

> As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a den (gaol); and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a dream. (Bunyan, 1987, p. 11)

The Pilgrim's Progress was published in two parts. The first part appeared in 1678 and the second part, written much later, in 1684. The book takes the form of a dream narrative, with narrative alternating with dialogue between the story's many allegorical characters. The story of Part I is about an individual, Christian, leaving the City of Destruction where all will be damned and searching in a new world for signs that he at least has been saved. In this new world he encounters temptations, trials, and battles (Vanity Fair, Apollyon, Giant Despair) and fluctuates between periods of desolation (the Slough of Despond, the Valleys of Humiliation, and the Shadow of Death) and ones of consolation (the Palace Beautiful, the Delectable Mountains, the Country of Beulah). The goal is the Celestial City, reached once the River of Death has been successfully crossed. In his pilgrimage, Christian has companions, some of whom are true helpers (the Evangelist, the Interpreter) and others are false (Ignorance, Talkative, etc.). What makes the story more 'modern' than many earlier allegories is that the core of the story is the individual consciousness of Christian. He and his two main companions, Faithful and Hopeful, have a fictional existence, which is more than just to represent a number of abstract qualities and categories of people (Crawford, 2012, pp. 53–54). The book in many ways appears to be allegorical, but the nature of the allegories is often not clear, heightening a sense of uncertainty, which is one of the hallmarks of the book. Bunyan also frequently invokes an emotional response in the reader which runs counter to the moralistic interpretation suggested by the allegory. Christian comes across as an emblematic figure to be admired – that of the Christian pilgrim looking for signs of salvation – but also sometimes unsympathetically as neurotic, self-interested, and excessively harsh to those who do not share his beliefs (Mills, 1980, pp. 174–175, 177; Nellist, 1980).

The Pilgrim's Progress has been described as an 'original' and was particularly seen as such by Romantic critics; however, it is, in fact, very much a stylistic hybrid drawing from a variety of sources, including medieval morality plays, biblical commentaries, and conversion narratives (above all, from Bunyan's own *Grace Abounding*), as well as from the chivalric romances with their castles, dungeons, and monsters, which also produced Malory's *Le Morte Darthur.* In some ways, its strain of psychological realism marks one of the steps that was leading towards the novel, though this is more noticeable in Part II than in Part I and in Bunyan's other major work of fiction: *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (Hill, 1988, pp. 360–362; Milne, 2015, p. 27; Sim, 2010).

Bunyan was also a satirist whose targets were the established Church, Quakers, Ranters, and Catholics, the self-satisfied godly, those who lacked any sense of sin, those who disavowed their earlier beliefs for the sake of an easy life, and those who went along with the 1660 Restoration settlement and acquiesced in the persecution of Dissenters. In *The Pilgrim's Progress,* Christian, like Bunyan in real life, is often pugnacious towards the enemies he encounters in his travels and expresses a robust Pauline version of Christianity. Even more significantly perhaps for his subsequent influence and the book's reputation, is an often implied and sometimes explicit radical critique of social inequality, a contempt for the rich and the powerful, for landlords, wealthy libertines, and, as he bitterly put it, for those 'scarce for touching of the poor ones that are left behind; no, not with a pair of tongs' (Hill, 1988, p. 128). The sense of the rottenness of the society from which Christ is trying to save us reaches a climax in the account of Vanity Fair, set up by Beelzebub to tempt pilgrims on their way to the Celestial City, and in which:

> Are all such merchandise sold, as houses, lands, trades, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. (Bunyan, 1987, p. 79)

Social and political critique in *The Pilgrim's Progress,* however, is clearly of secondary importance to Bunyan. The wish is for those guilty of social and spiritual bullying to get their comeuppance, not a call for social reform or political action (Hammond, 1980, pp. 125–126, 130).

Although Bunyan's satire is much more than just an attack on an emerging capitalist economy, it has been seized on as such by some of those who have

seen Bunyan as a champion of their cause. It is one of the many features of the book that help to explain its appeal over the centuries to many of those who have felt themselves to be downtrodden or dispossessed, whether members of the English working class, Welsh people working for English landlords, New England colonists, Taiping rebels in China in the 1850s and 1860s, colonial peoples throughout the British Empire, or Polish peasants in Germany (*The Pilgrim's Progress* was the first English book to be translated into Polish, in the mid-eighteenth century) (Hill, 1988, pp. 374, 377; Greaves, 2002, p. 632). For those who took religious as well as secular messages from the book, its Calvinist theology also had its appeal, the implication being that while the rich might despise and lord it over the poor in this world, the roles of the two groups would be reversed in the world to come.

BUNYAN AND THE INTELLECTUALS

As a dissenting tinker who became a prolific and highly popular author, Bunyan was no stranger to the sneers and contempt of the country's intellectual elite. In 1659, preaching in a barn near Cambridge, Bunyan clashed magnificently with someone who might be seen as at the very heart of that elite: Thomas Smith, keeper of the Cambridge University library, lecturer in rhetoric at Christ's College, and professor of Arabic.

Quite why Smith was attending the service in the barn is not clear, but a debate between the two men broke out when Smith not just queried Bunyan's interpretation of James 2:12 but also his right to preach, objecting that 'the church of Christ at Bedford' consisted 'only of women and a few Laymen', was not a church, and had no power to authorise preachers. According to the 'Letter' about the episode that Smith subsequently published, Bunyan responded to this attack by asking Smith 'very many impertinent diverting questions' such as when he had been converted. Smith replied that Bunyan was not his confessor but 'the meanest of all the vulgar in the Country'. Bunyan responded spiritedly, calling Smith a fool and a 'giddy pated fellow', mocking his 'hell bred Logick' and shooing him 'away … to Oxford' in a phrase reminiscent of his favourite religious text, Martin Luther's preface to St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, in which Luther denounces the 'sophistical subtleties of schoolmen' (Greaves, 2002, pp. 122–123).

In his 'Letter', Smith made some criticisms of Bunyan's points worthy of his extensive learning, and, in particular, a defence of 'Logick' or reason, but

could not also help falling into abuse and hyperbole. Bunyan's followers were 'sad melancholly persons, not looking nor behaving themselves like other folk', he said. If people like them were allowed to prevail, down would go universities, schools, hospitals, 'the poorest hireling in the Town will soon have as much land as you, or your Heir', and the Commonwealth would collapse to be replaced by 'a Community of Bears Tygers'. Even the most extreme warnings from the metropolitan and Oxbridge elite to the British demos in 2016 about the dangers of Brexit, or predictions from within the Beltway and from Hollywood about the likely collapse of civilisation following Trump victories in the 2016 and 2024 US presidential elections, would have had difficulty in out-bidding that.

Bunyan did not reply to Smith, but another Cambridge man did, in Bunyan's defence, showing that then – as now – the educated elite was far from unanimous in its views and not all its members oblivious to the needs of the common man.

The clash between Bunyan and Smith was part of a wider clash emerging in the seventeenth century between the world of 'faith' and that of 'reason' and 'science'. In *The Pilgrim's Progress,* Bunyan mocked those who objected to 'the base and low estate' of the pilgrims, 'their ignorance of the times in which they lived, and want of understanding in all natural science' (Bunyan, 1987, p. 65).

MULTIPLE READINGS OF THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

It is not surprising that a book that has been so widely read by so many people in many different parts of the world should have been interpreted in many different ways. The way the term 'Vanity Fair' rapidly acquired associations that have little to do with its original meaning shows us how stories and images from books can acquire lives of their own, forging connections with a range of other motifs, traditions, and experiences. Bunyan's 'Vanity Fair' was a place of trial and terror, a parable about persecution, an echo of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs,* a defence of Puritanism. Detached from the book, and in the cultural memory of generations that have followed, it has come to stand instead for temptation (an idea absent in the book), consumer capitalism (despite the 'goods' for sale indicating something metaphorically much more profound), leisure, liberated women, and the idea of social life as a

performance (all absent from this episode in the book) (Milne, 2015, pp. 2–3, 34–35, 37–38, 58, 128).

Individual episodes aside, the book as a whole, in addition to its core theological reading – the one its author encouraged us to focus on – has been approached by critics in three main ways: the psychological and clinical; the autobiographical; the Marxist and historical. All three overlap and complement each other.

Bunyan was clearly a man of strong and at times violent emotions. He also spent a great deal of time thinking about himself and the state of his 'soul', as anyone searching for signs of salvation might well do. This has led some critics, from William James onwards, to try to define and explain Bunyan's mental states. *Grace Abounding* is obviously a key text here, but the speculations have also extended to *The Pilgrim's Progress,* where it cannot be assumed that descriptions of psychological states necessarily relate to the author behind the fictional character or are anything other than literary conventions. Bunyan's most recent and most authoritative biographer, Richard Greaves, makes use of studies of clinical depression and, while admitting that doing so is 'fraught with difficulty' in the case of someone long dead, claims that he has done so 'cautiously'. He does, however, quote approvingly the judgement of other Bunyan scholars that there is 'no bolder spectacle of incipient insanity in literature' than *The Pilgrim's Progress* and that 'Bunyan *needed* prison'. Given the difficulty in making clinical judgements about the mental state of people even when they are alive and can be examined, such statements need to be taken with a pinch of salt. While interesting biographically, if true, I am not sure how much they help us to make critical judgements about Bunyan's writings as works of art or as expressions of religious feeling and belief, any more than they would be if one were doing the same for Vincent van Gogh, William Blake, or St John of the Cross. I certainly do not find it helpful to be informed that the story of Giant Despair in *The Pilgrim's Progress* illustrates the 'beneficial impact of sunshine on many depressed people' (Greaves, 2002, pp. vii, 233, 241, 243–244).

Retrospective psychological evaluations of the author are a subset of a critical approach that looks for links between the work of art and the author's life. Given the degree of interest in *The Pilgrim's Progress,* it is not surprising that some people have crawled all over it to try and find real-world models for the characters and places mentioned in the story. Bedfordshire topography has been extensively investigated to this end. My favourite scholarly article is one entitled 'Why no one can mend the Slough of Despond', which looks at

the challenge faced by Christian in getting out of this swamp in the context of the mud and floods faced by those charged with road maintenance in seventeenth-century England (Alff, 2013). Again, though of passing interest, this to me is a diversionary enterprise which gets in the way of one's main task as reader.

The third, and much more fruitful, reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the one that is sometimes referred to as the Marxist one because of the left-wing affiliations of those associated with it, such as the historians Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson; however, it is better seen as the one that, in Hill's words, is keen to avoid the book 'becoming a literary monument, read as a timeless classic with minimal reference to the world in which Bunyan suffered and fought' (Hill, 1988, p. 372). This reading of the book draws attention to Bunyan's repeated attacks on an unequal status quo, his defence of the poor, his distaste for the rich and powerful – 'the Lord Carnal Delight, the Lord Luxurious, the Lord Desire of Vain-glory, my old Lord Lechery, Sir Having-Greedy, with all the rest of our nobility' – and his strong sense of the innate superiority of the poor to the rich. It also stresses the subsequent role of the book in the English working-class movement and its use by other movements struggling against persecution and repression. There is no suggestion that Bunyan himself was politically active or that his main concern was anything other than the state of people's souls and their fate in the world to come but that his radicalism about the state of this world was so genuine and powerful that, though 'slumbering' in his own case, it was destined to re-awaken others to the need for action to bring about political change (Thompson, 1963, pp. 31–34; Bunyan, 1987, p. 84).

These readings, of course, do not exclude each other. The episode in which Christian does battle with Apollyon, for example, has some of the strongest political allusions in the book, but it can equally be read as an episode from a chivalric romance, a spiritual allegory, or a psychological myth (Davies, 2002, p. 288).

PART I AND PART II

Readers of *The Pilgrim's Progress* have frequently been puzzled about the connection between Parts I and II of the book. As Ronald Knox, the English Catholic writer, put it, 'Christian (in Part I) goes on a pilgrimage, Christiana (in Part II) goes on a walking tour', suggesting by implication that Part II

lacks the passionate urgency of Part I (Keeble, 1980, p. 2). Many critics have felt Part II to be inferior to Part I for that reason. Others, from Scott and Southey in the early nineteenth century onwards, have seen Part II as not inferior but different, more novel-like, less preoccupied with doctrinal matters, more tolerant of those who are weak and struggling, and placing a greater emphasis on the communal life of a group of Christians rather than on their individual destinies (Seed, 1980, pp. 85, 88). At the same time, they have still regarded the two parts as largely separate from each other. More recently, some critics have emphasised the links between the two parts, as well as some of the similarities. Bunyan wrote Part II partly because of the appearance of spurious continuations of Part I, which he was keen to refute. In doing so he makes use of the same fictional framework, continuing with the same characters – Christian's wife and his children – who had appeared at the beginning of Part I and showing how Christiana's journey to gain her and her children's salvation comes about through Christian having already achieved this at the end of Part I. In other ways, Part II complements and completes the picture of the Christian life in Part I, adding to the images of faith and hope in Part I those of charity in Part II. In doing this, Bunyan extends his notion of Christian heroism, based in Part I on the medieval exemplars of the knight and the saint, into the world of ordinary men and women in which the old, the infirm, children, the despondent and fearful, and those with doubts can nonetheless also have hopes of finding salvation (Keeble, 1980). It is a complementary version of Christianity that has been and continues to be hugely influential, sometimes for both good and ill, within contemporary secularised Western societies.

BUNYAN ON THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

The Pilgrim's Progress is worth reading, not least because it helps to educate one as a reader. Writing in the middle of an explosion in printing and reading, and as a Puritan preoccupied with the right reading of the Bible as the source of truth and the strenuous reading of oneself to check on one's state of grace and faith, Bunyan placed great emphasis on 'graceful reading'. In *Grace Abounding,* one discovers how Bunyan learnt to interpret the Bible, and its many hidden meanings, as a key part of his spiritual awakening. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* one is nudged towards reading the signs in the allegory ('Put by the curtains, look within my veil'), avoiding a merely conventional or literary

reading of the book, seeing both the book itself and the Bible to which it constantly refers as a looking glass, which aids one to self-knowledge ('Read thyself'), and constantly checking that one is not *mis*reading. Bunyan's aim is to encourage one to reflect on one's reading, worry away at the meaning of the text and one's response to it, and turn what one has learned into action and experience within one's life. To ensure that we do this, the book is full of marginal notes, which (like the sadly abandoned *foot*notes at the bottom of the pages of many contemporary academic texts) beneficially slow down one's reading, encouraging one to follow up a biblical reference, consider an authorial aside, and thus for a moment to step outside the fable (Davies, 2002, pp. 6–9, 219, 271–276; Owens, 2010; Milne, 2015, p. 12; Machosky, 2007; Iser, 1975, p. 7). William Blake captures the deadly seriousness of reading in a watercolour drawing, which shows Christian against a lurid and ominous backdrop, bent double beneath the heavy burden (of sin) on his back, and totally absorbed in the book held between his two hands (see below).

Bunyan prefaces *The Pilgrim's Progress* by urging the reader's active involvement in the text – 'O then come hither, And lay my book, thy head and heart together' – and ends Part I with a proposal for ensuring that the book's meanings continue to be explored even after its pages have been closed:

> Now reader, I have told my dream to thee,
> See if thou canst interpret it to me,
> Or to thyself or neighbour: but take heed
> Of misinterpreting: for that instead
> Of doing good, will but thyself abuse:
> By misinterpreting evil ensues. (Bunyan, 1987, pp. 9, 143)

It is a message to us from the seventeenth century about reflective reading, not just while one is reading a book but as one carries its legacy out into the rest of one's life.

BUNYAN'S INFLUENCE ON OTHER AUTHORS

Echoes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the fictional writings of other authors are to be found everywhere. Sometimes, it is fictional characters within these writings indicating their familiarity with the book, as in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* where Huck Finn says:

> [It is] about a man that left his family, it didn't say why. I read considerable in it now and then. The statements was interesting, but tough. (Twain, 1953, p. 103)

At other times, it is the incorporation of aspects of *The Pilgrim's Progress* into the narrative and themes of the book, as in John Buchan's First World War novel *Mr Standfast,* which is named after a Bunyan character and involves the use of a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to decipher coded messages. Frequently, it is Bunyan's idea of a quest, derived from the traditions of medieval romance (as in Malory), that is borrowed. One finds traces of this in Dickens's *Oliver Twist,* subtitled *The Parish Boy's Progress,* in Henry Williamson's First World War novel *The Patriot's Progress,* and even more profoundly in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath,* whose themes of quest and conversion, as well as other references to Bunyan, have led one critic to describe the book as that author's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Napier, 2010). Other writers in whose writings *The Pilgrim's Progress* has left its traces include Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, Robert Browning, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Enid Blyton, L. Frank Baum (in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* with its Emerald City and 'yellow-brick road'), and, more recently than any of these, the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Zimbabwean Tsiki Dangarembga (Hofmeyr, 2010, pp. 168–169; Murray, 2010, p. 120; Mason, 2010, pp. 156, 159).

BUNYAN AND BECKETT

One writer who, in a number of his works, has used the idea of a quest, even if it is a quest that does not get anywhere, is Samuel Beckett. The work which carries the strongest echoes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is *Mercier and Camier.* At one point, Mercier says to Camier:

> Shall we fritter away what little is left of us in the tedium of flight and dream of deliverance? Do you not inkle, like me, how you might adjust yourself to this preposterous penalty and placidly await the executioner, come to ratify you?

All hope of salvation and life after death – the aim of Christian's quest – has gone. Beckett's two pilgrims have no goal: 'I can think of no word, nor of any set of words, to express what we imagine we are trying to do', says Mercier. They lack determination or vigour, their journey is full of false starts, halts

and returns, and the most the two characters can do for each other is to be around while their companion serves out his time: 'I can help you', says Camier to Mercier, 'I can't resurrect you' (Beckett, 1974, pp. 33, 83, 89). Although *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not mentioned anywhere in the book, it serves as a 'palimpsest', continually overlaid by the picture of a very different world in which heroism, moral clarity, teleology, and any sense of metanarrative are completely absent (J. Campbell, 2010, p. 217). The echoes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* reinforce the sense of what is missing: a cross ('What is that cross? I once knew . . . but no longer'); a grave whose meaning Mercier and Camier 'had once known, and all forgotten'; a monument to a dead soldier 'faithful to the last to (a) hopeless cause' (Beckett, 1974, pp. 10, 98).

I can think of no better way of reflecting on either Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress* or Beckett and *Mercier and Camier* than by reading them alongside each other. The contrast highlights what each distinctively is and what each distinctively is not. This is the argument for making sure that we do not just immerse ourselves in contemporary literature so that assumptions that we take for granted because they are part of the air we breathe are brought up short by being confronted with a world and mindset very different from our own.

What Bunyan and Beckett have in common is the encouragement they give to readers to reflect on their reactions to what they are reading, to look at the text in terms of what it does and how it acts on the reader and not (or not just) on what it means (Davies, 2002, p. 9). The deeper indeterminacy of much of Beckett's writing – the lack of obvious connection between situations and events, the inconsequential nature of much of the dialogue, the absence of any clear common-sense meaning about what is going on – of course does this to an even greater degree than Bunyan's allegories. Given one's sense of an absence of meaning, and one's instinctive wish to fill this vacuum with meanings of one's own, and one's frustration when the meanings one has projected fail to fit, leave things unexplained, or contradict each other, one is necessarily driven into thinking about what one's attempt at interpretation tells one about oneself and one's relationship with this text, and, indeed, into reflecting on the nature of fiction itself (Iser, 1975, p. 273).

BUNYAN AND BLAKE

One way of ensuring that one's reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a reflective one and continues to occupy one's mind after closing its pages is to look at it

through the eyes of William Blake, who, in the last years of his life, produced 28 standard quarto volume size watercolour drawings related to the book. I say 'related to the book' because although all the scenes are recognisably ones connected closely to some event in the story, they are not necessarily intended to 'illustrate' just what Bunyan had put in the text. Blake tried to get behind Bunyan's allegories to what he saw as their inner meaning, rejects it when he finds he does not like it, and gives his own interpretation instead. His focus is on the dreamer of the story recounted in the book as much as on Christian as its main character and on the events of the story as a metaphorical reflection of different states within the dreamer's mind. He also weights the attention he gives to the various parts of the narrative differently from Bunyan.

Blake's illustrations can be seen online or, better, in Gerda Norvig's beautifully produced edition. It is a book in which the superb plates are prefaced by over a hundred pages of sentences such as the following:

> A hermeneutic that is visionary, when considered as a method of extrinsic interpretation … charts a middle course between the Scylla of antithetical criticism and the Charybdis of appreciative exegesis. … the skeptical perspective of extrinsic-devalorising critiques tends to keep faith with the ideology of Cartesian dualism, depending on an axiomatic subject/object split that denies (or anyhow brackets out) the complex and complicitous relations existing between what the critic sees and how she sees it. (Norvig, 1993, pp. 4, 10)

After pages of this, a dose of Bunyan's clarity and simplicity makes one realise the drawbacks of postmodernity as well as what Christian must have felt when he finally extricated himself from the Slough of Despond. Bunyan's own words in *The Holy City* deserve a wider audience:

> Words easie to be understood do often hit the mark; when high and learned ones do only pierce the Air. (Davies, 2002, p. 200)

BUNYAN OR NIETZSCHE?

As someone who has profited from reading Bunyan but also learned a lot more from Nietzsche, it is extraordinarily difficult, indeed impossible, to reconcile the two. *The Pilgrim's Progress,* had Nietzsche read it, and especially Part II,

would only have reinforced his belief that Christianity represented a slave mentality, the expression of the *ressentiment* or envy of the dispossessed, and as such should be swept aside. God is also dead or He is not. But Bunyan and Nietzsche have in common a shared sense that there are big issues about 'the meaning of life' with which any human being worth his salt needs to keep on wrestling throughout his life. It may not matter whether one puts on one's armour to fight Apollyon and affirm one's salvation or faces one's fate in a God-less and meaningless world with one's head held high, at least one is neither Bunyan's Mr Pliable nor Nietzsche's *Herdentier* (herd animal). Bunyan and Nietzsche, in their very different ways, and using the word with two different but not unrelated meanings, share a common wish that one has enough faith to be 'saved'.

WHY READ THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS TODAY?

The major reason why *The Pilgrim's Progress* is so 'spectacularly untrendy' is because it is a deeply Christian book in a world in which the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the 'Sea of Faith' is now so complete as barely even to be heard as a murmur. Bunyan's reputation as a Calvinist and predestinarian also does not help, nor do some of the ways in which Bunyan disposes of allegorical characters who fall short: Ignorance who gets shunted down to Hell for failing to grasp that salvation comes through grace and not works, just as he thinks he is about to cross over to the Celestial City; Simple, Sloth, and Presumption who are hanged; Mistrust and Timorous whose tongues are burned with a hot iron. Unsurprisingly, supportive critics such as J. A. Froude, C. S. Lewis, and F. R. Leavis have found this kind of stuff off-putting. The distaste of the future Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, despite his admission of a 'moderate admiration' for Bunyan, extended even to Christian: 'for myself', he commented, 'I can say that I disliked the man, and should have felt no concern had he been drowned in that last river' (Sharrock, 1976, p. 112). Michael Davies, however, makes a good case that Bunyan's theology, with its emphasis on grace, faith, and relief from guilt over sin, and its focus on the distinction between believers and unbelievers rather than between elect and reprobate, is a more 'comfortable doctrine' than many have suggested. Bunyan, he argues, plays down the importance of predestination, and, far from being a fable of religious despair, *The Pilgrim's Progress* shows how hopelessness can be dispelled by God's mercy (Davies, 2002, pp. 17–80, 282–283).

In addition, the theology is not necessarily the most important feature of *The Pilgrim's Progress.* It is very much a work in which Bunyan the writer of fiction takes over from Bunyan the theologian. It has been described as a religious work, not a theological one, and one in which Bunyan's theology, as expressed in his many other works, is made to accommodate human experience. It is more about the mind of Christian than it is about the mind of God, the latter being infinitely remote and impenetrably veiled (G. Campbell, 1980, pp. 251–256; Newey, 1980, p. 30). As Coleridge put it, Bunyan's 'piety was baffled by his genius, and the Bunyan of Parnassus had the better of the Bunyan of the Conventicle' (Sharrock, 1980, p. 50). There are psychological and experiential truths in *The Pilgrim's Progress* that speak to one's own experiences and make one reflect more deeply about them. Vincent Newey, in one of the most penetrating essays on the book, talks about its 'underlying modernity'. This kind of comment could easily reflect a search for the things that a modern critic would very much like to have found in a classic work but which are not really there. Newey, however, is simply confirming the experience of many readers, which is that they are taken into the mind of someone very much alone in this world, struggling to understand what it is all about, looking for unequivocal signs but never quite finding them, pursuing a 'tortuous and slippery path', 'ever falling into the morass and ever emerging afresh'. Newey compares *The Pilgrim's Progress* with other literary works of psychological ordeal and progress, such as *The Prelude, Great Expectations* and *The Old Curiosity Shop,* all of which he sees as offering the reader a distinctive expression of 'being in the world' (Newey, 1980, pp. 21, 32–33, 39). In light of this, Bunyan may be even closer to Beckett than I have suggested above.

The positive reasons for reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* are therefore: first, because it represents that grappling with the 'meaning of life', which F. R. Leavis found so striking in the book and which he saw as a *sine qua non* of all great art; second, because it is a book which is about how one reads and which refines one's skills as a reader; and, third, because the book has had such an extraordinary afterlife that, as a cultural phenomenon, it deserves our attention (Sharrock, 1976, pp. 217–218).

I would add, in conclusion, a further reason, which is that it reminds us of a religious ideology that had great intellectual force throughout the period from the mid-sixteenth century until the end of the seventeenth. This ideology helped to create that 'protestant ethic' based on effort and willpower, which survived and continued to thrive long after its religious foundation

had begun to wane and which has subsequently been so influential both in Britain and the USA. Bunyan in a small way helps us understand who we are.

Finally, Bunyan's clarity, simplicity, and verve are hugely attractive. The provincialisms and archaisms of his language also account for some of the charm of his writings. Reading that Little-faith 'made shift to scrabble on his way', Christian 'thought I should a been killed … over and over' ('a' is a frequently used dialect form of 'have'), Pliable 'leered away on the other side', the road was 'wearisome, through dirt and slabbiness', 'Christian began to dispond in his mind', and 'the Pilgrims were much stounded' helps to break readers' expectations, jerk them out of their linguistic habits, and make them look at the English language afresh (Bunyan, 1987, pp. 61, 67, 121, 136, 264).

FURTHER READING

Anyone who has enjoyed *The Pilgrim's Progress* may wish to read one or both of the major biographies of Bunyan: *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (2002) by Richard Greaves and *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church 1628–1688* (1988) by Christopher Hill, who was my 'moral tutor' at Balliol and once criticised me for my failure to show much enthusiasm for seventeenth-century English history (I have made up for this since). The two take different approaches and complement each other. Gerda Norvig's *Dark Figures in the Desired Country: Blake's Illustrations to The Pilgrim's Progress* is worth reading for the comments on specific plates and above all for the plates themselves (though these can also be found online). It is worth noting that Blake assumed that viewers of his plates were familiar with *The Pilgrim's Progress.*

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

Bunyan's spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* is worth reading once one has finished *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 1966). It gives one a more direct insight into the mind of its author. Its psychological intensity and anecdotes from Bunyan's daily life make it quite gripping in places. Although mostly about experiences before he went to prison, it was written there and is strongly coloured by that fact. In prison, Bunyan

wrote, 'them Scriptures that I saw nothing in before, are made in this place and state to shine upon me' (Bunyan, 1966, p. 98). Like other examples of prison literature – Boethius's *Consolation,* Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison papers and letters – it is a work which shows the consolatory effect of remembering and reading of the example of others similarly imprisoned, in Bunyan's case of St Paul and his 'captivity epistles' (Zim, 2014, pp. 121–142).

Robert Browning's often un-anthologised verse ballad *Ned Bratts,* also available for free online, is worth reading for its own merits and as one small example of Bunyan's ubiquitous influence on English letters. The cross-references to *The Pilgrim's Progress* are many, and the poem conveys something of the positive effects that Puritanism – which has a bad press these days – has had on England.

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6

EDWARD GIBBON'S THE HISTORY OF THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (1776–1788)

In 1966, W. H. Auden wrote a long and thoughtful essay entitled 'The Fall of Rome', which *Life* magazine, rather extraordinarily, decided not to use and which remained unpublished until 1995 (Bowersock, 2009, pp. 194–220). The article revealed Auden's longstanding interest in the topic and familiarity with Edward Gibbon's treatment of it in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The article ends with Auden's 1947 poem 'The Fall of Rome', which imagines an empire and a world in which 'Cerebrotonic[32] Cato … Extol(s) the Ancient Disciplines' while 'the muscle-bound Marines / Mutiny for food and pay', and beyond which:

> Altogether elsewhere, vast
> Herds of reindeer move across
> Miles and miles of golden moss,
> Silently and very fast. (Auden, 1958, p. 138)

In the article, Auden writes about his affinity with the Alexandrian Greek poet Cavafy (1863–1933), another writer fascinated by the Roman Empire and an assiduous reader of *Decline and Fall* (and also of Plutarch, as we have seen), who based some of his poems on events as Gibbon described them. Cavafy was attracted by the Greek Christian culture of the later Eastern Empire, a taste Gibbon largely failed to share. His most frequently quoted poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904) begins: 'What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum? / The barbarians are due here today', but concludes with a sense, which Gibbon might well have shared, that it was never the barbarians who were the main problem (Cavafy, 1975, pp. 14–15).

Auden and Cavafy were only two of many writers and thinkers whose view of the past, sense of the present, and fears and hopes for the future had been shaped by reading the work of a man who, another English admirer of

[32] Cerebrotonic: 'characterised by introspection and introversion'.

Cavafy, the novelist E. M. Forster, had called the 'greatest historian and greatest name of the eighteenth century' (Womersley, 1988, p. 141). For much of the century and a half following the publication of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* the title of the book and its author were household names, at least in the English-speaking world. Familiarity may have faded in the second half of the twentieth century, as educational and cultural changes pushed the ancient world to the margins of our consciousness, but Gibbon's catchy title is still more likely to be known than most of the other works discussed in this volume, even if knowledge stops at that point. Its popularity is due to the fact that it tackled the fate of the thousand-year-old civilisation on which the West was founded and the way that civilisation came to shape the new European and Western order, which emerged from its ruins. In a world in which, for much of the 1,500 years following the fall of Rome, education continued to be centred on the Latin language and the treasured texts of antiquity, what topic could be more important in helping one explain where one had come from and who one was? Voltaire's view – that the rise and fall of the Roman Empire was the most important subject in the annals of humanity – was widely shared (Womersley, 1988, p. 10). It is an indication of the magnitude of the changes brought by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that the decline and fall of Rome should now seem so remote from anything that affects us directly.

Even though I have no recollection of studying the Roman Empire at school and never came across a copy of *Decline and Fall,* I remember knowing about Gibbon and the title of his work long before I went to university to study history. This was probably from something I had read or heard in school, an effect of the prevailing Zeitgeist within which Gibbon was still lingering like a fading echo. As a result, although I read Evelyn Waugh's 1928 novel *Decline and Fall* before I read Gibbon, I was still more than half aware of the significance of the novel's title and its hint of a comparison between what happened to Rome and an implied twentieth-century civilisational collapse.

When I got to Oxford, I found that Gibbon, initially, was centre stage. I have long since thrown out the document that listed the requirements for the Modern History degree I had been accepted to study ('modern', of course, meaning from the fall of Rome onwards) and cannot remember precisely what we were required to study in relation to Gibbon except that it needed some reference both to parts of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and to the *Vindication* that Gibbon published in 1779 in response to critics who had seen Chapters XV and XVI of the first volume of *Decline*

and Fall as an attack on Christianity (Gibbon, 1961). Although a short work, which attracted much attention at the time – it went through ten editions, two in German – there is little in the *Vindication* to interest anyone today outside the world of Gibbonian scholarship (Gibbon, 1961, p. viii). My copy was printed by the Oxford University Press 'for the Board of the Faculty of Modern History' and clearly directed at us undergraduates. It has a preface by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History, whose lectures on Gibbon and Macaulay for the first term 'Prelim' course I attended and whose writings on Gibbon and editions of *Decline and Fall* reveal the close affinity he felt for Gibbon as both a man and a historian (Gibbon, 1993–1994; 2005; Trevor-Roper, 1997, pp. 405–419).

Although, as I remember it, we only had time to dip into *Decline and Fall,* I felt that I ought to own a copy and so bought all six volumes of a second-hand copy, in bright blue leather, of Dean Milman's 1855 edition (Gibbon, 1855). It was not in the best condition, and, in the course of my time at Oxford, a couple of volumes mysteriously disappeared from my (in those days unlockable) room, with the result that a few years later, and following further deterioration, I handed the remaining volumes to a charity shop and invested in a cheaper four-volume embossed Victorian edition, part of Frederick Warne's Chandos Classics series. This sat on my shelves accusingly for many years until finally I got round to reading it systematically from beginning to end, the excessively thin flyleaves of each volume shedding their fringes every time I opened them and leaving little bits of grey paper all over the floor. More recently, I have acquired an electronic copy, at a cost which finally makes Gibbon accessible to everyone as long as they have an e-reader. This has enabled me to carry on reading when away from home and allowed me to highlight passages for future reference without leaving ugly marks on a printed copy. I have also recently worked with two other editions: a massive 1847 one-volume edition so heavy it nearly burst the bag in which I was carrying it home from the London Library and a library copy of David Womersley's attractive three-volume hardback edition published in the year of the bicentenary of Gibbon's death (Gibbon, 1847; 1994).

In the same way that the *Decline and Fall* presented itself at different dates and in different formats to its late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century readership – six successive volumes, many editions, abridged, pirated, censored, and translated versions – so Gibbon entered my own life physically in different ways and at different times. I assume my Chandos Classics edition, with its attractive brown, green, and gold front cover binding, will return

in due course to the charity shop, second-hand bookshop, or eBay cycle when I am no longer here, or maybe simply dumped at the tip as were many of my late father's remaining books a few years ago. One can only speculate over the fate of copies of all the other many editions of *Decline and Fall* that there have been in this and other countries over the years since 1776. It is part of the afterlife of a book that one rarely, perhaps mercifully, thinks about.

WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE?

Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* does what it says it is going to do more than the title of many other history books. Gibbon regretted not tracing back the sources of Rome's decline to the tyranny which succeeded the death of the first emperor Augustus or from the civil wars following the fall of Nero. He sets the scene instead in his first volume by surveying the state of the Roman Empire during that 'happy period, AD 98–180, of more than fourscore years (when) the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines'. There was much at that time to reassure:

> The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful, influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence. (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 31)

But all was not well, not least through the enervating effect of an authoritarian regime in which all power rested with the Emperor. After the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180, the absence of clear rules of hereditary succession, a series of weak or tyrannical emperors, and the outbreak of periods of civil war signalled the intermittent problems that would face the Roman Empire from then onwards. Along the borders of the Empire, as Gibbon begins to reveal to his readers, there was also the growing threat from barbarian tribes. Having shown how the restoration of internal order during the reign of Diocletian (284–305) was short-lived, Gibbon ends Volume 1 with what were to become his infamous Chapters XV and XVI in which he charts, from the

point of view of a secular Enlightenment historian, the rise of Christianity within the Empire and provides a revisionist account of the persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities.

Volumes 2 and 3, published in 1781, resume the story with the reign of Constantine (306–227), the division of the Empire into two parts, one ruled from Rome and the other from the newly established city of Constantinople, and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Following the brief return of paganism under the Emperor Julian (Julian the Apostate), whose short reign (361–363) merits three chapters, Gibbon focuses increasingly on the growing power of the barbarians – Huns, Goths, Vandals, and Saxons – in the West and, within the Empire, on the bitter conflicts that broke out inside Christianity, in particular, between Trinitarians and Arians. Volume 3 ends with the sack of Rome by the Vandals (455), the removal from power of the aptly named last Roman emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus ('little Augustus'), in 476, the establishment of Christian barbarian kingdoms in the Empire's former western provinces, and, with a nod to his English audience, the final collapse of Roman power in the former Roman province of Britain.

Volumes 4, 5, and 6, published in 1788, continue to move from West to East, and though never losing sight of what is happening in Rome itself, the main focus is on what survives of the former Roman Empire in Byzantium. After charting the temporary revival of imperial power under Justinian (527–565) and his legacy in the codification of Roman law, as well as continuing religious conflicts within Christianity, Gibbon increasingly focuses on the threats to the Empire, first from the Persians and then from the Arabs, following the appearance of the new religion of Islam. Given that the Byzantine Empire lasted for a further 1,000 years and, according to Gibbon, was chiefly marked by stagnation, he eschews a strict chronological approach in favour of what becomes increasingly a revolving searchlight, now lighting on the expansion of Islam, now on conflicts within Christianity, now on the state of Italy in the Middle Ages, now on the Crusades, now on the Turks or Mongols. Chapter XLVIII provides a fascinating introductory timeline of Byzantine emperors, with Gibbon doing nothing to spare his readers vivid accounts of their 'fanatic vices', in a style categorised by one Gibbonian scholar as 'higher tabloid' but which, for this reason alone, no reader should miss (Howard-Johnston, 1997, p. 56).

Nor, towards the end of Volume 5, should any reader miss the account of the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, one of Gibbon's set piece

narratives that, once read, is never forgotten. After this, the nadir of the 'decline and fall', Gibbon turns his spotlight back on to Italy in the Middle Ages, ending his last volume once again in the ruins of Rome (amidst which, according to his *Memoirs,* the idea of writing the *Decline and Fall* had first come to him), but ruins in some cases now restored through the initiative of sixteenth-century Popes and 'devoutly visited by a new race of pilgrims from the remote, and once savage, countries of the North' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 134; 1994, Vol. 3, p. 1084).

HOW SHOULD A CONTEMPORARY READER APPROACH DECLINE AND FALL?

This summary may tell one something about the scope of the *Decline and Fall.* It does not tell one what kind of book it is. To do that, one needs to experience Gibbon's style as a writer, its distinctive characteristics at the level of sentence, paragraph, footnote, chapter and book, and his pervasive use of irony. One also needs to think about the kind of history Gibbon writes, both what he feels he is doing when he writes history and how his kind of history fits into the development of British and European historiography. If one does this, *Decline and Fall* begins to tell one as much about Gibbon the man and the eighteenth-century world in which he lived as it does about the periods about which he wrote. For some Enlightenment historians, throwing light on the present may have been one of their main purposes in writing, and, in Gibbon's case, there have been suggestions that he was drawing parallels between the Roman Empire and the British one of his own times, though the evidence for this is decidedly thin (Robertson, 1997, p. 257).

A focus on Gibbon as writer, historian, eighteenth-century and Enlightenment man, and individual has dominated writings about him over the last forty years; this has tended to push aside what was the initial reaction of many who wrote about him in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was to concentrate on the subject matter of his work, its accuracy, and the appropriateness of his interpretations of the history of Rome and Byzantium. Early writings about the *Decline and Fall* concentrated, as we shall see, on the fairness of his account of Christianity's rise. A hundred years later, J. B. Bury, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge and editor of a widely used and heavily annotated edition of *Decline and Fall* (1896 onwards) was still taking the book very seriously as an account of the later stages of the

Roman Empire, while accepting that methods of using historical sources had much improved and knowledge of Gibbon's topics much advanced during the intervening years (Gibbon, 1896–1920, pp. xxxi–lxviii).

Bury's focus on the accuracy of *Decline and Fall* was criticised by the great philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood for 'the very strange feat of bringing Gibbon up to date by means of footnotes . . . without suspecting that the very discovery of these (numerous new) facts resulted from an historical mentality so different from Gibbon's own' (Collingwood, 1961, p. 147). The idea of adding footnotes to an existing history rather than writing one's own may be a curious one, but Collingwood's comment is not wholly fair. Bury was well aware that Gibbon was 'the expounder of a large and striking idea', that the wish to support this idea, even if unconsciously, had influenced his selection of facts, and that no amount of new facts would render the idea irrelevant or uninteresting. All Bury was doing was enabling early twentieth-century readers of *Decline and Fall* to put alongside Gibbon's account new information, which would give them an alternative perspective; in the same way, any reader of Gibbon today might wish to supplement, but in no sense replace, *Decline and Fall* with the writings of more recent historians such as Peter Brown, Anthony Bryer, or Averil Cameron. *Decline and Fall* is still worth reading, not just for historiographical, literary, and psychological reasons, but also for what we still learn from it about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire through the eyes of a highly talented person who spent long years reading and thinking about it.

PHILOSOPHIC HISTORIAN OR ÉRUDIT?

Gibbon wrote history at an interesting time in the development of the subject. The eighteenth century has sometimes been seen as an Age of Rationalism more concerned with analysing the general characteristics of human nature and the laws underlying the development of human societies than with pursuing historical studies. There is an element of truth in this. The eighteenth century saw a reaction against the previous century's preoccupation with antiquarian fact-searching. Even though Gibbon in *Decline and Fall* relied heavily on these érudits, he was nonetheless capable of dismissing them contemptuously as 'mere chronicler(s) or *faiseur(s) de gazettes*'. Gibbon also pre-dated the professionalisation of historical study stimulated in the following century by Ranke and his followers, while at the same time pioneering

some of the characteristics of historical study which would later be absorbed into that movement (Porter, 1988, pp. 15–16, 58).

If they called themselves anything, eighteenth-century historians were inclined to adopt the title of 'philosophic historians'. It was a title that Gibbon, with some reservations, was happy to embrace. A 'philosophic historian' was above all someone who looked for secular explanations of history rather than providential ones, which explained the past in terms of the working out of God's will. Gibbon was well-read in providential history, not least that of Bossuet, with which he first became familiar during his brief adolescent flirtation with Roman Catholicism (Gibbon, 1966, p. 59). Insofar as he ever had the kind of world picture that would have enabled him to write such history, Gibbon soon lost it. It was his resolutely secular explanation of the rise of Christianity in Chapters XV and XVI of *Decline and Fall* which reveals him as a quintessentially Enlightenment figure and which unsurprisingly brought him into conflict with leading figures in the Church of England.

'Philosophic historians' also distinguished themselves from historians of an earlier generation in moving away from a focus on heroes and villains towards wider concerns about causation, the role of impersonal forces, and the laws and commonalities underlying human nature. Historians were expected to interrogate the past by asking questions about it, find patterns, make comparisons, and group events into themes, not just narrate them. Social and economic history were expected to be more prominent, as developments could no longer be explained solely in terms of the impact of a small number of individuals. There was still a sense that history could and should be instructive and thus enable one to live better in the present, but a growing feeling that this was of secondary importance to establishing, in Ranke's later words, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it actually was).

Gibbon had a high regard for the 'philosophic historians' who immediately preceded him and who, in some cases, were still alive when he started writing. He was strongly influenced by Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois,* both in its civic humanism and its sociological approach to historical explanation, in due course following Montesquieu, who had written in 1734 *Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur des Romains, et de leur Décadence,* in the topic he chose for his grand work of historical explanation. Close to home was the group of Scottish historians whose works Gibbon regarded as far superior to anything being produced south of the border. Adam Smith, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, and, above all, David Hume were, in his eyes, the Scottish 'school of Montesquieu'. Gibbon particularly venerated Hume

('the Great David Hume') and Robertson, seeing Hume as Scotland's Tacitus – Gibbon's greatest hero among Roman historians – and Robertson, in a slightly less favourable reference, as its Livy. Hume, whom Gibbon met and with whom he corresponded, shared Gibbon's philosophical scepticism and his interest in the distant past (unlike many previous historians with their preoccupation with recent and contemporary history). Hume's *History of England* also reflected the sophisticated attitude towards source criticism that Gibbon was later to adopt: distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, evaluating primary sources in light of internal and external evidence, and making probabilistic judgements as to their reliability (Wootton, 1997, pp. 208–209; Gibbon, 2005, pp. 658–660).

Gibbon, however, was no jejune admirer of his great French and Scottish contemporaries and very much his own man when it came to deciding what he thought was the best way to write history. He was sceptical about Montesquieu's categorisation of different types of society and their patterns of growth and decay, distrustful of William Robertson and Adam Ferguson's environmental determinism, and increasingly dubious as to whether the idea of long-term progress in human affairs was sustainable. His well-known statement that history is 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind' is scarcely bursting with Enlightenment optimism (Porter, 1988, pp. 69–71; Roberts, 2014, pp. 9–10, 119; Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 102). Gibbon was unafraid to point out his heroes' deficiencies when he felt he had to, whether this was Montesquieu's 'lively fancy' and 'treacherous facility with hypotheses', Hume's 'ingenious but superficial' approach, or Voltaire casting a 'keen and lively glance over the surface of history' (Womersley, 1988, p. 38).

He was particularly critical of Voltaire, whom he had met in Lausanne and whose theatrical productions in that city he had attended as a young man. While sharing Voltaire's scepticism and belief that history could and should be explained solely in secular terms, Gibbon condemned the way his anti-clericalism led him into over-simplified explanations of complex matters. 'Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot', he later commented. Voltaire was also cavalier with his facts, giving rise, in Gibbon's introductory description of the extent of the territories ruled by Rome, to one of his choicest ironic footnotes: 'M. de Voltaire, unsupported by either fact or probability, has generously bestowed the Canary Islands on the Roman empire'. Despite all this, Gibbon seems happy in his autobiography to claim acquaintance with Voltaire, following the latter's death, and to mention him in generally

favourable terms (Gibbon, 2005, pp. 651–3; Porter, 1988, p. 68; Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 54).

Although Gibbon referred rather dismissively to 'mere chronicler(s)' he did not underestimate the importance of making careful and thorough use of the findings of *les érudits*. *Decline and Fall* was a momentous undertaking, based as it is on the study of vast numbers of classical writers and on the fruits of modern European scholarship. Gibbon also uses his sources carefully, is quick to spot bias, draws attention to matters on which the sources disagree, and is often explicit about both what we can and cannot learn from them. His sources, however, are primarily literary ones. He ignores manuscript evidence and makes no use of the emerging historical sciences of palaeography and diplomatics (the study of documents). While enabling us to look at the past in new and fruitful ways, he does not add to our factual knowledge of it (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. xii; Porter, 1988, pp. 5, 74).

In other respects, Gibbon is a surprisingly modern historian. One is conscious throughout *Decline and Fall* that this is one interpretation of the past that one is reading – an authorial production and not the past itself. As Roy Porter has said, Gibbon knew full well that 'all history is contemporary history' long before Croce and Collingwood turned this into a centrepiece of their philosophy of history. Gibbon puts himself within the story, as narrator, judge, and writer of ironical footnotes, self-consciously presenting an image of himself as 'the historian of the Roman empire', bon viveur, and man of the world (Porter, 1988, pp. 8, 160–161).

Two Gibbon scholars, David Womersley and Charlotte Roberts, have also argued persuasively that there is a significant shift in the ways in which Gibbon writes history in the course of the six volumes, over the fifteen years in which they were written and published. The later volumes, it is suggested, show a greater awareness of the difficulty of interpreting characters as complex as the Emperor Julian (the Apostate) or Muhammad, a willingness to present their contradictory aspects and to leave it up to readers to come to their own conclusions, a sense of the relativism of judgements of value, and a greater feeling for the diversity and sheer contingency of the world. As Gibbon worked his way through the thousand years that followed the division of the Empire and the sack of Rome, his confidence in the historian's ability to impose patterns and explanations begins to wane, with, as Womersley has said, doubt, hesitation, reserve, and humility sometimes taking over. There is also a suggestion that Gibbon, the philosophical sceptic and critic of 'enthusiasm' and things 'monkish', also begins to have a greater appreciation

for the miraculous. About this, in agreement with a third Gibbon scholar, David Wootton, I am rather more dubious (Roberts, 2014, pp. 5, 27–29, 87–90, 106–108, 137, 139; Womersley, 1988, pp. 3, 44, 182, 207–209, 232, 264, 292, 295; Wootton, 1997, pp. 231–232).[33]

GIBBON AND THE ART OF THE FOOTNOTE

It is well known that one of the pleasures of reading *Decline and Fall* is Gibbon's footnotes. I knew this even before I had read him, such has been their notoriety. For Roy Porter, 'they are the most entertaining, malicious and often salacious footnotes in history', adding, with an erudition Gibbon might have admired, that there were 8,362 of them (Porter, 1988, p. 72). In fact, most of them are simply short bibliographical references or straightforward additional pieces of factual information, which are useful to know but which would encumber the flow of a chapter if included in the main text. These attest to the extent of Gibbon's reading but can easily be skipped by the general reader. The others, in which Gibbon conducts a kind of subterranean dialogue with his readers or, in the words of the Byzantine historian Anthony Bryer, 'obscure skirmishes' with other historians, are on no account to be missed (Bryer, 1997, p. 102). Originally placed as endnotes, as in far too many modern scholarly publications, they were brought forward to the bottom of the page from the third volume onwards, the result, Gibbon said, of 'public importunity' (itself a nice example of the kind of slightly pompous but self-mocking humour that they contain).

[33] David Womersley and Charlotte Roberts mention how Gibbon gains a hold over scholars who study him and who end up making connections between him and their own work. Womersley cannot help himself at one point, when writing about Gibbon and footnotes, from drifting into the following parody of the book he is analysing: 'the initially well-policed frontiers of the historian's empire become permeable and are overrun by hordes of distracting and opaque particulars' (Womersley, 1988, p. 95). Roberts shows signs of being influenced more by contemporary literary theory than by Gibbon's prose when writing about the shift in her subject's approach to historical writing: 'A narrative arc of historiographical triumph, whereby the reappraisals of causality, tonal modulations, and disaggregation of the fifth and sixth volumes of the *Decline and Fall* represent the culmination of a continuous process of personal and compositional fulfilment, is belied not only by Gibbon's increasing dissatisfaction with history's totalising meta-narratives but also by the diverse directionality of his text' (Roberts, 2014, pp. 5, 54). One returns to a perusal of Gibbon's prose with renewed pleasure.

Here are a few examples of Gibbon enjoying himself, making digs at fellow historians, burying in Latin a fact that might shock readers of a delicate disposition, mocking credulous Christians, showing off a turn of phrase, or just cracking a joke.

> As a great number of medals of Carausius are preserved, he is become a very favourite object of antiquarian curiosity, and every circumstance of his life and actions has been investigated with sagacious accuracy. Dr Stukely, in particular, has devoted a large volume to the British emperor. I have used his materials, and rejected most of his fanciful conjectures. (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 336)
>
> In the general account of this war, it is easy to discover the opposite prejudices of the gothic and the Grecian writer. In carelessness alone are they alike. (p. 262)
>
> See Templeman's Survey of the Globe; but I distrust both the Doctor's learning and his maps. (p. 55)
>
> [Of appointments made by the libidinous Emperor Elagabalus:] A dancer was made praefect of the city, a charioteer praefect of the watch, a barber praefect of the provisions. These three ministers, with many inferior officers, were all recommended enormitate membrorum. (p. 168)
>
> By each of his concubines, the younger Gordian left three or four children. His literary productions, though less numerous, were by no means contemptible. (p. 195)
>
> Sir William Temple and Montesquieu have indulged, on this subject, the usual liveliness of their fancy. (p. 239)
>
> If we consult the succeeding writers, Eutropius, the younger Victor, Orosius, Jerom, Philostorgius, and Gregory of Tours, their knowledge will appear gradually to increase, as their means of information must have diminished – a circumstance which frequently occurs in historical disquisition. (p. 650)
>
> The Dissertation of M. Biet was crowned by the Academy of Soissons, in the year 1736, and seems to have been justly preferred to the discourse of his more celebrated competitor, the Abbé le Boeuf, an antiquarian, whose name was happily expressive of his talents. (p. 711)
>
> When Julian, in a momentary panic, made the sign of the cross the daemons instantly disappeared (Greg. Naz. Orat. iii. p. 71). Gregory supposes that they were frightened, but the priests declared that they were indignant. The reader, according to the measure of his faith, will determine this profound question. (p. 872)

Gibbon makes particular use of footnotes as a means of conveying the kind of persona he wishes readers to have in their minds as they read his works. Womersley has traced the way in which, from the third volume onwards, Gibbon feels able to address his 'long-accustomed' readers more directly and becomes more confident about using the footnotes to reveal his personal preferences and prejudices (Womersley, 2002, pp. 2–4).

Gibbon's footnotes have even fallen within the ever-circling spotlights of those who draw their inspiration from the likes of Foucault, Derrida, and Bakhtin. The useful point has been made that the attempt to ground the authority of a text on other texts (those cited in the footnotes) sometimes ends up undermining that authority in this case because of the way in which Gibbon frequently uses the footnotes to qualify his main text and to show how the different sources he has been using disagree with each other. The footnotes are therefore another way in which Gibbon is conveying the message that one looks in vain in this world for sources of indisputable authority (Palmeri, 1990).

GIBBON 'THE LORD OF IRONY'

Gibbon's famous irony has attracted both fans and critics over the years. Cardinal Newman, a reader and re-reader of *Decline and Fall,* and in many ways, a fan, nonetheless disliked Gibbon's mordant irony, as did most of Gibbon's Christian critics, seeing it as a veneer spread over a very real hostility to some of their fundamental beliefs (Young, 1997, pp. 309–330). It is not difficult to understand how Gibbon's irony might and did exasperate his critics, while amusing and delighting his fans: the way he says one thing and means another leaves the true meaning unsaid and therefore invulnerable to attack, sows doubt in the reader's mind as to what actually is being said, affects the 'discriminating disenchantment' of his hero Tacitus, and disarms criticism through humour (Gay, 1975, pp. 24–25, 31). One can imagine the powerless apoplexy that a passage such as the following – part of Gibbon's account of how the 'dark abyss of metaphysics', during the age of the great Christian Councils, almost brought the Empire to a standstill – must have induced in vicarages up and down the land:

> It was agreed (I must intreat the attention of the reader), that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father *and* the Son, as from one principle and

> one substance; that he proceeds *by* the Son, being of the same nature and substance; and that he proceeds from the Father *and* the Son, by one spiration and production. (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 891)

Even Byron's cameo of Gibbon in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* despite referring to his 'gigantic mind' and the 'perpetuity of (his) fame', cannot be seen as wholly complimentary:

> And shaped his weapon with an edge severe,
> Sapping a solemn crew with solemn sneer;
> The lord of irony – that master-spell,
> Which stung his foes to wrath. (Byron, 1959, p. 224)

In order to understand the extent to which Gibbon used irony, one needs to be aware, as in the case of Voltaire, that, at least when commenting on Christianity, he was operating in a hostile environment. As David Womersley has said, Gibbon, with his sceptical views, 'had little reason to feel at home in the England of George III', and would have been aware that there was still a danger that he might fall foul of the law (Womersley, 1988, pp. 106, 111, 115). This helps to explain why Gibbon handled many religious topics with kid gloves, aping the language of the pious, and getting his real points across obliquely through irony. The following passage about the way the decline of traditional Roman polytheism paved the way for the reception of Christianity is designed to leave one feeling that, perhaps after all, Gibbon really does believe in Providence and the validity of the Christian revelation, despite the fact that the explanation he is providing for the rise of Christianity is wholly and explicitly secular:

> Some deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence had not interposed a genuine revelation, fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, whilst, at the same time, it was adorned with all that could attract the curiosity, the wonder, and the veneration of the people. (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 499)

One of the influences on Gibbon's style was Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales,* a biting and ironical polemic defending Jansenist views on grace against their Jesuit opponents and attacking the Jesuit practice of casuistry. In his *Memoirs,*

he claims to have re-read it 'almost every year … with new pleasure' and to have learned from it how 'to manage the weapon of grave and temperate irony even on subjects of Ecclesiastical solemnity' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 79). It is also a favourite text of the current author. In reading both *Lettres Provinciales* and some of the more controversial chapters of the *Decline and Fall,* one has the same energising sense of a writer wholly engaged in his task, determined to succeed and enjoying the battle.

GIBBON THE ENGLISHMAN AND THE EUROPEAN

Before looking further at Gibbon's relationship with Christianity, it is necessary to say something about the man. More than in the case of some other famous historians such as Macaulay, Clarendon, Michelet, and Mommsen, posterity has shown a close interest in Gibbon's private life and his character. This is partly because he sometimes obtrudes himself within his historical writings, partly because parts of his generally uneventful life nonetheless succeed in capturing one's attention, but perhaps above all because he wrote six versions of his autobiography, a feat that has had both psycho-biologists and avant-garde textual critics descending on him like vultures.[34]

Edward Gibbon was born in 1737 into a moderately prosperous family with High Tory and High Church sympathies. Following the early death of his mother, his upbringing was partly overseen by his Aunt Kitty, who gave him his 'early and invincible love of reading, which', as he wrote in his *Memoirs,* 'I would not exchange for the treasures of India', and 'a taste for books, which is still the pleasure and the glory of my life' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 36). Like many of the English-speaking world's famous writers, before the great educational revolution which in the twentieth century displaced them, he acquired an early love for the classics, reading Herodotus and Tacitus as well as more recent writers such as Machiavelli. After a sickly childhood with spells at a Kingston grammar school and at Westminster (where Aunt Kitty ran a boarding house), of which he seems to have had no fond memories – 'a school is a cavern of

[34] Porter (1988, pp. 11–12), writing in the late 1980s, commented that more was now being written about the *Memoirs* than about *Decline and Fall.* There was particular interest in the relationship between Gibbon and his imperious father. The notion in one of these writings that *Decline and Fall* was 'the only achievement of a life of failure and renunciation', and the idea of a comparison between Gibbon and the eunuchs who figure so prominently in his accounts of the Eastern Empire, he dismisses as 'piffle'.

fear and sorrow', he wrote in his *Memoirs* – he went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, at the age of fourteen (Gibbon, 1966, p. 44).

Gibbon paints a picture of Oxford as a place sunk in sloth and neglectful of its most basic responsibilities towards its pupils. It was perhaps fortunate for his continuing education that he was not to remain there for more than fourteen months. His departure in 1753 was the result of an event in his life that has attracted the attention of biographers and would-be analysts: his decision to be received into the Roman Catholic Church and the ruthless paternal response when told what he had done. Gibbon's father, although High Church and with earlier Jacobite sympathies, had no wish to suffer by association with a community still subject to penal laws. His son was rapidly removed from Magdalen and, at the age of sixteen, dispatched to Lausanne to be looked after by a Swiss Protestant pastor tasked with converting him back to Protestantism. He was not to be allowed to return home for over three years and did not finally come back to live in England until 1758.

It was in Lausanne, under his Swiss tutor, that he became competent in Greek and proficient in Latin, Cicero – 'a library of eloquence and reason' – being a particular favourite (Gibbon, 1966, p. 76). Following an appropriate course of reading, he also returned to the Protestant fold. Gibbon clearly thrived in Lausanne, becoming totally fluent in French, making friends, attending Voltaire's theatricals, reading widely, and starting on a number of writing projects of his own (in French). '(Such) as I am', he wrote in his *Memoirs,* 'in Genius or learning or manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne: it was in that school, that the statue was discovered in the block of marble'. The consequence was that, as he said, he had 'ceased to be an Englishman' and become 'a life citizen' of the 'great republic of Europe' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 86; 2005, p. 656; Roberts, 2014, p. 156).

In Lausanne, he met Suzanne Curchod, the dowry-less daughter of a Swiss pastor, to whom he proposed, a marriage promptly vetoed by Gibbon's father. Gibbon's dutiful acceptance of the parental edict, recorded by him later in the passionless words 'I sighed as a lover: I obeyed as a son', has not done wonders for his reputation among those more interested in Gibbon the man than Gibbon the historian. Suzanne later married the Swiss banker Jacques Necker, who became Louis XVI's finance minister and whose dismissal in 1789 helped to precipitate the French Revolution. Intellectually, she was more than a match for Gibbon, as a Latin scholar capable of picking up the Tacitean echoes in the persona of a historian that Gibbon was establishing for himself in *Decline and Fall.* She presided over a glittering salon during the many years

in which she and Jacques Necker were in Paris, corresponded with leading literary figures of the day, and did an excellent job in educating her only child, Germaine, the future Madame de Staël, scourge of Napoleon and one of the greatest literary figures of the early nineteenth century. Gibbon kept in touch with the Neckers, staying with them for extended periods of time: in Paris, in 1777, following the publication of the first volume of *Decline and Fall,* and again towards the end of his life when, after the French Revolution, they had returned to the northern shores of Lake Geneva and Gibbon was back in Switzerland, a few miles further down the lake in his beloved Lausanne.

Following his return to England in 1758, Gibbon re-established an English identity, serving in the Hampshire militia during the Seven Years War and later arguing that 'the Captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 117). He also went on to become an MP (1774–1780, 1781–1784) but never once spoke in the House and although a member and at times regular attender of 'the Club' – a group that included Samuel Johnson, Boswell, Garrick, Sheridan, Burke, Charles James Fox, Adam Smith and Sir Joshua Reynolds – never felt at home within the English literary establishment (Rogers, 1997).

Once the Seven Years War was over and access to the continent resumed, Gibbon, freed from his military duties, was on his travels again. He persuaded his father to let him have the Grand Tour he had missed because of the war. This, via Paris and Lausanne, took him to Rome. 'After a sleepless night', he later wrote, 'I trod with a lofty step the ruins of the Forum: each memorable spot where Romulus *stood* or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell was at once present to my eye'. It is here, he claimed, that the idea of writing the history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire first came to him, on 'the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol' (Gibbon, 1966, pp. 134, 136).

Everyone knows, or used to know, this story, but it looks very much like a *post hoc* tidying up of a more complex narrative. There is no strong contemporary evidence that such a project was in Gibbon's thoughts when planning his trip to Rome and plenty of evidence that he was working on other possible historical projects. Insofar as there is any truth in the idea, it was the project of writing a history of the city of Rome, rather than the vastly more demanding task of writing the history of the Empire, that had begun to enter his mind around that time.

Nor was this alleged annunciation followed for quite some time by any action enabling Gibbon to start work on such a project. Indeed, he embarked on other ventures: an unfinished history of liberty in Switzerland, two volumes of the *Mémoires littéraires de la Grande Bretagne,* published jointly with his lifelong Swiss friend Georges Deyverdun, and the curious *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid,* a David versus Goliath assault on the Bishop of Gloucester, William Warburton, a well-known writer on literary and religious topics, in which Gibbon further honed his Pascalian irony and whose publication he subsequently regretted (Gibbon, 1972, pp. 131–162; Roberts, 2014, p. 165; Bowersock, 2009, pp. 48–49).

The death of his father in 1770 seems to have had a liberating effect on Gibbon, both financially and psychologically. Now established in his smart new home in Bentinck Street, with servants, a pet parrot and a fluffy pooch (a Pomeranian) named Bath, enjoying his snuff and getting increasingly fat (Mr Chubby Chub was one nickname), he was finally able to embark on his first volume, which was published in 1776 (Porter, 1988, p. 65). The book was a success from the first day, and Gibbon was not being immodest when he wrote to his stepmother that it was 'very well received, by men of letters, men of the world, and even fine feathered Ladies: in short by every set of people except perhaps by the Clergy who seem (I know not why) to show their teeth on this occasion.'[35] Further volumes followed in 1781. It was around this time that Gibbon decided finally to break what he called 'my English chains' and move to the place that meant most to him (Roberts, 2014, pp. 103, 161). He sold his English estates and moved the greater part of his 6,000 books to Lausanne, ordering eight literary busts in black Wedgwood, including one of Cicero, to be specially made to accompany them in his new library, with a view to signalling, one is led to believe, the kind of pantheon which, following his literary success, he too was about to join (Bowersock, 2009, pp. 32, 40–41; Gibbon, 1966, p. 183). It did not take him long to become, in the eyes of an English visitor, the 'king of the place' (Trevor-Roper, 1997, p. 405). Volumes 5 and 6 were composed there between 1784 and 1787, and it was on the night of 27th June 1787, between 11 and 12 p.m., that – in the other story about Gibbon everyone knows, or used to know, and that I have used

[35] Abigail Williams (2017, pp. 251, 254) points out that writers across the eighteenth century repeatedly stressed the advantages of an understanding of history, especially in the case of young women. Histories were often read for passages that could be taken out of context, such as an isolated episode or a sub-plot, rather than from cover to cover. *Decline and Fall* is unlikely to have been an exception.

ironically about myself at the end of major projects over the years – he put down his pen and, after 'several turns in the *berceau* or covered walk of Acacias which commands a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains', bade farewell, as he put it, to 'an old and agreeable companion' while reflecting that 'the life of the historian must be short and precarious' (Gibbon, 1966, p. 180).

GIBBON AND CHRISTIANITY

In a society still profoundly shaped by the Church and Christianity, any historian's treatment of the history of Christianity was bound to be scrutinised with care. *Decline and Fall* was no exception, and the contemporary response to Gibbon's explanations for the rise of Christianity in his first volume threw up issues both about the historical process itself and about Gibbon the man and the historian, and his beliefs, that have shaped the reception of his works ever since.

In 1910, as Liberal Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, a lifelong fan of *Decline and Fall,* decided that it would be good for prisoners if they were to have access to improving authors, among them his own two favourite historians, Gibbon and Macaulay. One Dartmoor convict, who had benefitted from this initiative, subsequently reported that he had been more influenced by *Decline and Fall* than by any of the other books he had read, but that its effect had been to turn him against all religion. One wonders how typical a response this might have been. The book had, after all, helped to form Churchill's own secular outlook on the world (Quinault, 1997, pp. 319, 325). But did Gibbon intend people to respond in this way? Is it a response which reflects his fundamental attitude towards religion, or at least towards Christianity and its effects in the world? Or had this convict failed to grasp the much more subtle messages Gibbon was trying to convey? These are questions that readers and Gibbon scholars have been asking ever since.

An account of a period of over 1,300 years in which Christianity played a central role was bound to throw up a range of issues about which believers of different persuasions and non-believers would have different views. Whatever one decides about his views, Gibbon was very interested in religion and made himself knowledgeable about it, to the extent that nineteenth-century clerical writers such as Dean Milman and Cardinal Newman lamented the fact that no writers of their own century had yet produced a better account of the rise of Christianity (Porter, 1988, p. 134). Despite saying in his autobiography

that 'of the pains and pleasures of a spiritual life *I* am ill-qualified to speak', his personal experience as a young man of conversion and re-conversion also gave him insights into the religious sensibility. These insights became more nuanced, as Womersley has suggested, as he worked his way through the long centuries covered by *Decline and Fall*'s later volumes (Gibbon, 1966, p. 21; Turnbull, 1982, pp. 23, 33–34; Womersley, 1988, p. 185).

The aspect of the history of Christianity that received most attention from Gibbon's critics was the explanation which he gave for its rise. The persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities, the growth of monasticism, the conversion of Constantine, the apostasy of the Emperor Julian, the conflict between Trinitarians and Arians, the great Church Councils, the Christianisation of the barbarians, the iconoclastic controversies, even the question of whether Christianity contributed to the decline and fall of the Empire – all these, though important and potentially controversial, and opportunities to sniff out Gibbon's biases, occupied critics much less than this core one. The reason for this is that the question struck at the heart of the credibility of the Christian revelation.

Despite opening Chapter XV of the first volume with a repetition of the traditional explanation of the rise of Christianity, which was that 'it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author', he goes on to assert that 'it may still be permitted, though with becoming submission (*his critics' alarm bells would have started ringing at this point*), to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 447). He then goes on to list these secondary causes: the zeal and passion of the early Christians; their doctrine of a future life; the 'miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church'; the 'pure and austere morals of the Christians'; the disciplined way the early church organised itself. The way he describes some of these might cause offence – the 'zeal' is 'inflexible' and 'intolerant', the idea of the future life has been 'improved' – but as secondary causes, it is difficult to argue against them.

The problem, however, was not just the tone. It was the very idea of talking about beliefs so central to a Christian's view of the world in purely secular terms. England at that time was a much more Christian country than it appears once one moved outside the circle of a small number of elite sceptics. To many eighteenth-century Christians, it was inconceivable that a religion espoused by the poorest and weakest members of the Roman Empire should have risen to such prominence, and following Constantine's

acceptance of Christianity, become the official religion of such a vast empire, without this being a truly miraculous event and part of the workings of Divine Providence. It did not require any analysis of secondary causes to explain it, especially when undertaken with a palpably fake 'becoming submission'. At its most fundamental, the issue between Gibbon and his critics was a battle for supremacy within religion between Reason and Revelation, a battle central to the Enlightenment (Aston, 1997). Gibbon carefully steered clear of commenting on the Gospel narratives at the heart of the Christian revelation, but by seeing the 'miraculous powers' of the early Church simply as one of the attractions of a religion that appealed to the unsophisticated, he was by implication throwing doubt on the veracity of the Gospel events themselves.

A lot was therefore at stake as parsons and bishops up and down the land – many of them great readers, scholars, and classicists – worked their way through the first volume of *Decline and Fall.* Trouble inevitably ensued. Although the main stimulus to the attack was the downplaying of Providence the criticisms of Chapters XV and XVI took a number of forms, including accusations of inaccuracy, plagiarism, deliberate distortion of the evidence, and incorrect interpretation. Gibbon was particularly sensitive about his honour and standing as a gentleman. He also had a literary reputation to establish. In 1779, he therefore responded in the *Vindication* to his main critics, who included Richard Watson, the professor of divinity at Cambridge, and Henry Edward Davis, an angry young graduate of Balliol College. Gibbon treated Watson's 'keen and well-tempered weapon' with respect but had nothing but contempt for the 'rustic cudgels' of Davis and one of the other polemicists, refusing even to respond to a fourth 'anonymous', and in Gibbon's eyes, misnamed, 'Gentleman', whose pamphlet, he said, revealed a mind be-fogged with 'the heavy mist of prejudice and superstition'. Gibbon's reply mocked his opponents in true Pascalian style, Mr Davis being invited to check personally that Gibbon did indeed possess historical sources of which Davis claimed he was ignorant:

> I cannot profess myself very desirous of Mr Davis's acquaintance; but if he will take the trouble of calling at my house any afternoon when I am *not* at home, my servant shall shew him my library, which he will find tolerably well furnished with the useful authors, ancient as well as modern, ecclesiastical as well as profane, who have *directly* supplied me with the materials of my History. (Gibbon, 1961, p. 81)

Davis, who had pointed out some minor errors in the printing in the text, was invited to seek employment with Gibbon as a corrector on future editions, if reasonable terms could be agreed.

Gibbon satisfied himself that he had floored his opponents, whose weapons 'have, in every assault, fallen dead and lifeless to the ground: they have more than once recoiled, and dangerously wounded the unskilful hand that had presumed to use them'. It is a judgement endorsed by both Dean Milman – 'Gibbon with a single discharge from his ponderous artillery and sarcasm, laid prostrate the whole disorderly squadron' – and Macaulay in the nineteenth century and by Trevor-Roper in the twentieth (Gibbon, 1961, pp. vi–vii, 72). This is not necessarily how many of his contemporaries perceived it. J. H. Plumb in this respect sees Gibbon as being out of harmony 'with a large part of his times', by comparison with the next century's greatest historian, Macaulay, who very much reflected the main currents of Victorian sensibility (Plumb, 1988, p. 256). The criticisms continued and gained added force following the outbreak of the French Revolution, which was seen as the result of the kind of questioning of traditional certainties with which Gibbon was associated. They even got nasty at one point, with Richard Hurd, bishop successively of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester, spreading a rumour about Gibbon's alleged homosexuality (Aston, 1997, pp. 257, 264–265; Womersley, 2002, p. 97; Turnbull, 1997, pp. 298–302).

Gibbon was not immune to this criticism and – while enjoying the cut and thrust of controversy and hoping 'that a hundred years hence I may still continue to be abused' – did not wish to alienate too many readers. Changes were made to later editions of the first volume, toning down the polemic and diminishing the impression that he was anti-Christian (Womersley, 2002, pp. 13, 18, 23–24; McKitterick & Quinault, 1997, p. 8). In later volumes, he also gives the impression of being more concerned with pursuing his core historical task than reinforcing his credentials as a sceptic. In Volume 2, he devotes three chapters to the short reign of the Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363), who tried to return the Empire to paganism and who since the Renaissance had had a generally favourable press among writers such as Montaigne, Locke, Bayle, Voltaire, and Montesquieu. Gibbon was not convinced and, drawing heavily on the account of Ammianus Marcellinus, provides a balanced depiction of Julian, showing him as a despot and someone as gullibly 'superstitious' and 'fanatical' in his own pagan way as the Christians he opposed. In recounting Julian's clashes with Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria and one of the greatest of the early Church Fathers, Gibbon, to his critics' surprise, sided with the latter,

seeing Athanasius as a man with secular leadership qualities and a defender of liberty against imperial tyranny (Wind, 1939–1940; Bowersock, 2009, p. 46; Womersley, 2002, pp. 135–145). In other ways, too, Gibbon showed that he could stand aside from contemporary 'groupthink', scorning the fashionable enthusiasm for the robust, freedom-loving barbarians who took over the Roman Empire in favour of showing how their conversion to Christianity helped to civilise them and not hesitating to praise medieval and Renaissance popes whenever he felt that their rule was effective and enlightened.

Subsequent commentators have been as interested in trying to establish Gibbon's own religious beliefs as in discussing his views as a historian on the role of Christianity within the Roman Empire. His dislikes with regard to Christianity are reasonably clear: its otherworldliness, its preoccupation with individual salvation, its lack of civic energy, its hostility to what he saw as the main sources of personal happiness, its 'bigotry' or lack of openness to debate and refutation (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. xxxv; Young, 1998, pp. 187, 198; Turnbull, 1982; Porter, 1988, pp. 106, 116; Womersley, 1988, pp. 122, 127). This explains his persistent hostility to monasticism, celibacy, and asceticism as well as his disdainful attitude towards many of the theological disputes that divided the early church and led to civil war and bloodshed. But it is not incompatible with belief and many of his prejudices were traditional Protestant ones towards Roman Catholicism.

Critics mostly agree that Gibbon was not the Voltairean or 'pioneer' of 'assertive rationalism' that some of his admirers have hoped to find in him, that he disliked 'bigotry' wherever he found it, including among atheists, and that he revered Christ as someone who had 'lived and died for the service of mankind' (Turnbull, 1982, p. 41; Gibbon, 1994, p. 934). Beyond this, there is disagreement. Trevor-Roper is persuaded that he was a deist. Girolamo Imbruglia thinks that he was an 'atheist in private'. Porter sees him as eventually abandoning rational Protestantism and finds it difficult to believe that he remained a Christian despite continuing to attend church. Turnbull sees him as someone attracted by 'pure Christianity' (Gibbon, 2005, p. 673; Porter, 1988, p. 114; Imbruglia, 1997, p. 102; Turnbull, 1982, p. 23).

Whatever Gibbon's views about the veracity of the Christian revelation, his sense of the utility of a religious establishment, apparent in *Decline and Fall* in his accounts of both paganism and Christianity, was enhanced by the French Revolution. *Decline and Fall* came too late to be influenced by Gibbon's reactions to the repercussions of this event, which he experienced not far from the French border in Lausanne. Faced with the incursions of these

'new barbarians' and fearing that constitutional monarchy and aristocratic rule were under threat, Gibbon in his final years was even more conscious of the social and political utility of religion. Burke's views on the French Revolution had his enthusiastic support: 'I admire his eloquence, I approve his politics, I adore his Chivalry, and I can almost excuse his reverence for Church establishments', he wrote in his *Memoirs* (Aston, 1997, pp. 273–275).

GIBBON AND ISLAMOPHILIA

One criticism of *Decline and Fall* by some of Gibbon's Christian critics was that, while undermining Christianity, he gave a free pass to Islam, not judging it by the same standards. Given that it was an Islamic power which finally destroyed the Christian Byzantine Empire in 1453 and had threatened the very heart of Europe within recent memory (the Turkish siege of Vienna was in 1683), what was seen as Gibbon's studied neutrality towards Islam, by comparison with his treatment of the impact of Christianity on the Roman Empire, was felt to be unfairThe criticism is both valid and invalid.

Gibbon had been interested in Islam from an early age and had hoped to study Arabic at Oxford, which had had a professor of Arabic since the first half of the seventeenth century. His lack of Arabic meant that he was limited in the sources he could use for the life of Muhammad. He was aware of the limitations and biases of these sources, but his preconceptions tended to send him in the direction of the pro-Islamic ones. In common with some other eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu, Condorcet, Goethe, and Voltaire, all of whom at different times were attracted by myths of the Other, Gibbon was impressed by some of the features he found, or thought he could find, in Islam: its Unitarianism, the theological simplicity of a religion with a purely human founder, its modest demands in terms of belief, its encouragement of civil duties, and the absence of a powerful clerical establishment and of monasticism (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 176–189; Porter, 1988, pp. 130–131; Lewis, 1976).[36] A romanticised Islam in the eighteenth century was a useful stick with which to beat a derided clerical

[36] Gibbon summed up Islam's modest demands as belief in 'one God', 'a necessary truth', and 'one prophet', summing it up as 'a necessary fiction' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 176). Lewis (1976, pp. 98–99) points out how Gibbon exaggerated what he saw as some of the strengths of Islam. In his view, Islam was less stable as a faith, had more dogmas, and was far more prone to schism than Gibbon imagined.

status quo, as it is in the twenty-first century for those who turn a blind eye to its faults with a view to attributing most of the evils of the world to the West's past dominance. Praise of Islam could be an indirect way of criticising Christianity, criticism of Islam a way of pointing out Christianity's similar faults. Gibbon made use of both. In practice, Gibbon's moderate Islamophilia was qualified by his willingness to look behind 'the cloud of religious incense' in which he found that Muhammad's life had been shrouded by his followers (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 212). In the eyes of Edward Said, Gibbon thus joins the long list of Europeans who have failed to give the 'magnificence' of Islam's achievements their due (Said, 1978, pp. 59, 74).

Gibbon left open whether Muhammad was acting out of 'fraud or enthusiasm' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 176) and whether he was an 'impostor' or an 'enthusiast' (p. 212). He was critical of the 'Koran' which, in a translation accessible to 'the European infidel', he described as an 'endless incoherent rhapsody of fable, and precept, and declamation, which seldom excites a sentiment or an idea' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 182). He reports 'the use of fraud and perfidy, of cruelty and injustice' in the service of Muhammad's propagation of the faith, including the assassination of apostates and the slaughter of seven hundred Jews, which 'the apostle beheld with an inflexible eye' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 202, 214). What Gibbon does not do, however, is treat this in a purely moralistic way. He sees the constraints and pressures on Muhammad, which turn him from 'the solitary of Mount Hera, to the preacher of Mecca, and to the conqueror of Arabia' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 3, p. 212). He also sees how what others would describe as 'foul' means and 'the arts of fraud and fiction' could seem justified in pursuit of what was believed to be a noble end. This does not make Gibbon a moral relativist, just a historian who puts describing and explaining before judging, as he also does in his account of the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. It is a way of doing history that becomes more common the more Gibbon moves towards the later parts of his story.

'THE TRIUMPH OF BARBARISM AND RELIGION': GIBBON'S CONCLUSIONS ABOUT WHY THE ROMAN EMPIRE DECLINED AND FELL

Readers expecting a sustained analysis and discussion throughout Gibbon's six volumes of the reasons why the Roman Empire declined and fell will be

disappointed. The first volume has this as a common thread, and the third volume, after recounting the removal of the last emperor in Rome, concludes with 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West'. These 'General Observations', however, have mostly been regarded as a damp squib. This was the view of some commentators at the time, and more recent writers have described them as 'hackneyed and superficial' and 'pompous inanities' (Trevor-Roper, 1997, p. 408; Porter, 1988, p. 4). They do, however, bring together some of the main points made in preceding chapters and reiterate Gibbon's fundamental thesis that the decline and fall represented 'the triumph of barbarism and religion'. In Volume 1, Gibbon had considered a number of possible reasons in the course of his introductory chapters – the shift from a republic to a monarchy, the enervating effects of wealth and luxury on the Romans, the pressures from the barbarians – failing to see any of them as sufficient by themselves to destroy the Empire, thus building up to his concluding discussion of the negative effects of Christianity. It was the spread of the Christian religion, he felt, that had turned people's thoughts away from success in this world, making them passive and neglectful of their civic duties, and that had filled the world with hordes of unproductive monks and endless conflicts about obscure points of theology. Christianity was, at best, indifferent to Rome's fate and, at worst, hostile to it.

Gibbon also places alongside the negative effects of Christianity as a cause of decline the fact of the Empire's 'immoderate greatness'. It would be easy to expect, before one gets well into reading *Decline and Fall,* that Gibbon was going to regret the Roman Empire's disappearance. He undoubtedly regretted the decline of the *civilisation* of Rome and the weakening of its legacy of civic virtue, freedom, and the arts, but he was no enthusiast for empire. The effect of empire, he repeatedly argues, is to concentrate power, stifle initiative, and destroy freedom (Robertson, 1997; Porter, 1988, pp. 137, 139). In his 'General Observations', he quickly moves from Rome to contemporary Europe and asks whether there is any danger that it might yet again be overwhelmed by barbarians. Because of his high opinion of the Europe which finally emerged out of the Christianised 'barbarian' successor states of the Western Roman Empire, he sees this as most unlikely. It is not just that there are now fewer barbarians but also that Europe has seen off subsequent attempts to re-establish a universal monarchy and is now, like ancient Greece, a grouping of separate states, which are managing to maintain a balance of power and in which 'the progress of knowledge and industry is accelerated by the emulation of so many active rivals' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 513).

Gibbon's idea that the energy of modern Europe was derived from the competition between different states was taken up in the next century by Guizot, who edited a French edition of *Decline and Fall,* and by John Stuart Mill, who saw it as the reason why Europe was thriving while China stagnated (McKitterick & Quinault, 1997, p. 341). It is an argument that might have been used by Brexiteers in the UK in their struggle to escape from the 'universal monarchy' of the European Union, though any move to enlist Gibbon as a Brexiteer *avant la lettre,* while tempting, would be anachronistic.

Gibbon does look at other reasons for Rome's decline: the political power of the Roman army; the selfishness of the Roman senatorial class, which gives up its freedom in return for offices, rewards, and exemption from military service; the abilities of barbarian leaders such as Alaric and Attila; and the decision to blur the Empire's boundaries by allowing barbarians to settle in its outer provinces. He does not, however, engage in the kind of detailed analysis which would have him examining in depth economic and social factors or assessing questions such as whether the simultaneous attacks of the Huns and the Vandals were a key turning point in the Empire's relations with the barbarians (Saunders, 1963). One gets the impression that Gibbon's interest had moved away from explanation, partly because the very notion of 'decline' had begun to blur, partly because he had come to see the evaluation of causality as more difficult than he had first imagined, but mainly because he was finding it more interesting and instructive to depict decline in all its complexity and contingency than to try to explain it.

THE RECEPTION OF GIBBON: 'GIANT', 'OLD QUEEN', OR 'HEAVY DUDE'?

There have been as many responses to *Decline and Fall* as there have been readers. Here are just three.

(i) E. M. Forster (1879–1970), as I have already mentioned, had a high regard for *Decline and Fall.* 'What a giant he is', Forster exclaimed in a letter, wondering why he found Gibbon's 'goings on with religion so queer' and puzzling that 'such a nature should be preoccupied at all with it' (Womersley, 1988, p. 141).

(ii) Joe Orton (1933–1967), author of black comedies and one of the last people one might have expected to have read Gibbon, also sensed things

about him requiring explanation. Asked by his agent whether he had read *Decline and Fall,* he responded with the words: 'What an old queen she is! Send up, send up, send up the whole time.' Given that Orton, a gay man, was highly unlikely to have known anything about an obscure eighteenth-century rumour concerning Gibbon's sexuality, this is most likely to have been an intuition about a possible source of the historian's irony. David Womersley, who has probably spent more time with Gibbon's prose than anyone in the world, sees Orton's comment not just as a response to Gibbon's irony but to the way in which a fellow dramatist presents his historical material (Bowersock, 2009, pp. 6–7).

(iii) For the third reader in my triumvirate, we have rather more evidence, as Iggy Pop (born 1947), the American punk singer and songwriter, published his reflections on reading *Decline and Fall* in a scholarly journal, telling us more about what the book meant to him than most other readers mentioned in this chapter. It was not just the admiration that one hard-working artist had for a 'guy' who had 'stuck with things' or that the cameo illustration of Gibbon on the cover made him look like 'a heavy dude', but also the beauty of the language, the sense of being freed from the tyranny of the present, and the humbling revelation of 'how little I know'. If Gibbon got it all wrong and is looking down from some other place, one can imagine the broad smile on the heavy dude's chubby face – Gibbon was no prude – at the thought that two hundred years later his magnum opus was being read with great pleasure, to the accompaniment of drugs and whisky, around 4 a.m. in cheap motels somewhere in the American South (Pop, 1995; Bryer, 1997, p. 112).[37]

These are all positive responses to *Decline and Fall* and all feel that they sense something of the man behind the historian. Other responses also involve a sense of the man, though more negatively. James Boswell, who knew Gibbon through the Club, hated him, finding him vain, criticising what he saw as his constant 'sneer' and, in a French inferior to Gibbon's own, dismissing him as *un marionet infidel* (Boswell, 1933, Vol. 1, p. 379, Vol. 2, 388; Porter, 1988, p. 65; Turnbull, 1997, p. 280). Coleridge found his style 'detestable', as if one were

37 Eleven years after he first read Gibbon, Iggy Pop, inspired by his memories of Gibbon and the sense that 'America is Rome', wrote an 'extemporaneous soliloquy', which he called 'Caesar' and which is to be found in his 1993 album *American Caesar.* His wife then bought him 'a magnificent original unabridged' *Decline and Fall* in three volumes, which he continues to read.

'looking at a luminous haze, or fog' ('Coleridge would know', adds Roy Porter), but felt that this was far from being the worst thing about him (Gibbon, 2005, p. 676; Porter, 1988, p. 3). Macaulay saw his style as a 'vain affectation', like 'dining on anchovy sauce' (Porter, 1988, p. 3). By far and away the most vicious criticism of Gibbon was the diatribe against him by William Beckford, writer and art collector, found on the flyleaf of Volume 4 of Beckford's own copy of *Decline and Fall.* This is all the more curious coming from the person who was to purchase Gibbon's Lausanne library following his death. Given that it is a document which contributes little to the development of this chapter but might interest readers, I will do as Gibbon would have done and place it in a footnote. One wonders, but does not know, whether any of the attitudes revealed in this private document were shared by other readers.[38]

The view of Gibbon as the English Voltaire, reinforced by the events of the French Revolution, continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.[39] For some, this was a negative reputation. The idea of Gibbon as a 'sneering infidel' – the phrase was Boswell's – may have diminished, but there was still a sense that he had been spiritually dead to the nature and influence of Christianity. It was a view shared by Cardinal Newman and

[38] 'The time is not far distant, Mr Gibbon, when your almost ludicrous self-complacency, your numerous, and sometimes apparently wilful mistakes, your frequent distortion of historical Truth to provoke a gibe, or excite a sneer at everything most sacred and venerable, your ignorance of the oriental languages, your limited and far from acutely critical knowledge of the Latin and the Greek, and in the midst of all the prurient and obscene gossip of your notes – your affected moral purity perking up every now and then from the corrupt mass like artificial roses shaken off in the dark by some Prostitute on a heap of manure, your heartless scepticism, your unclassical fondness for meretricious ornament, your tumid diction, your monotonous jingle of periods, will be still more exposed and scouted than they have been. Once fairly kicked off from your lofty, bedizened stilts, you will be reduced to your just level and true standard' (Bowersock, 2009, p. 35). Beckford bought Gibbon's library so that he would have something to read when he passed through Lausanne. He later sold it, and when re-sold, the books ended up in the Athenaeum in London.

[39] *Decline and Fall,* like Shakespeare, was felt to be eligible for treatment by the Rev. Thomas Bowdler, who produced a version in 1826 'for the use of families and young persons, reprinted from the original text with the careful omission of all passages of an irreligious, or immoral tendency'. Chapters XV and XVI were omitted altogether. The edition met with generally unfavourable reviews and did not sell (Turnbull, 1997, pp. 292–293). Bowdler's version of Shakespeare, found on his family's small number of bookshelves, was the one that introduced the current author to the nation's greatest dramatist. Sadly, no bowdlerised version of Gibbon had been available to stir his interest in the Roman Empire. The visible remains of Rome in northern England did that instead.

Matthew Arnold, and even by the President of the Royal Historical Society speaking at the commemoration of the centenary of Gibbon's death in 1894 (Turnbull, 1997, pp. 280, 306; Young, 1997, p. 309). For others, at least from the 1860s onwards, Gibbon also came to be celebrated as someone who had not been afraid to take on a dogmatic religious establishment. Carlyle had lost his faith and Winston Churchill came to see the world through secular eyes as a result of reading *Decline and Fall,* but neither regretted this nor thought the worse of Gibbon as a result (McKitterick & Quinault, 1997, p. 9).

The main criticism of Gibbon, as the nineteenth century advanced, was that his style of doing history had been superseded by new approaches, epitomised above all by that of Ranke, which, in theory, involved a more studied neutrality towards the events and topics being discussed. The historian Lord Acton – a relation of Gibbon's – claimed later in that century that 'there is as great a difference between history now and in Gibbon's time as between the astronomy before Copernicus and now' (Young, 1997, p. 330). Theodor Mommsen, the German historian of the Roman Empire, while regarding Gibbon as 'a first-rate writer' did not see his researches as being 'equal to his great views' and, as a result, politely refused to supply the public tribute to Gibbon that had been requested to him at the time of the 1894 commemoration (Bowersock, 2009, p. 17).

These shifts in the style of historical writing did not prevent Gibbon from continuing, in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, to be read with pleasure for both historical and literary reasons. Byron, Carlyle, Newman, Winston Churchill, E. M. Forster, Auden, Cavafy, and Joe Orton have already been mentioned in this chapter as attentive and positive readers of *Decline and Fall.* To these names might be added Louis XVI (whom, one discovers, read English), Gladstone (for whom Gibbon was 'one of the three greatest historians of all time'), Randolph Churchill (who called *Decline and Fall* his 'main literary passion'), Cosima and Richard Wagner (who read Gibbon to each other on different evenings during the years 1869–1876), and Henry James (who also read the autobiography) (Gibbon, 1966, p. 175; Porter, 1988, p. 1; Quinault, 1997, pp. 317–318; Bowersock, 2009, p. 5; Young, 1998, p. 196). A perceptive reader from outside the English-speaking world was Argentina's most famous twentieth-century writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who in 1961 contributed a preface to a selection in Spanish of passages from both *Decline and Fall* and the autobiography for use with students in Buenos Aires. *Decline and Fall,* he felt, would last both because of the sheer delight that its prose would continue to give readers and, as interest diminished in

its subject matter, because the historian himself would turn into history and people would wish to read it as a way of getting into the mind of an English gentleman of the eighteenth century. Borges saw it as a novel whose characters were the countless generations of human beings who passed through its pages and the charm of whose approach was that the author allowed himself to go with the erratic flow of extraordinary events he was narrating without imposing on them neat theories that would inevitably date (Borges, 1999, p. 114–117).

What helped to sustain the reading of *Decline and Fall* during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth was the continuing place of the Classics and the ancient world in the education provided in the country's grammar and public schools. 'The European elite's obsession with Greece and Rome', as David Rieff has described it, was also in Britain central to the country's self-conception as an imperial power (Rieff, 2016, pp. 18–19). As the prominence of Greece and Rome within the thought world of the elite receded, in the same way as Matthew Arnold's 'Sea of Faith', so did the proportion of the population among whom it might be expected that one might at least have heard of Gibbon and maybe even read him. This, together with changes in historiography, and the diminution of the sense that the past might be a source of useful knowledge and wisdom, helps to explain why some modern historians such as G. R. Elton and Roy Porter, while still writing about him, admit that 'hardly anyone reads (him) any longer' and that his great work 'may be becoming one of the great unreads' (Elton, 1969, p. 14; Porter, 1988, p. 11).

WHY THEREFORE READ DECLINE AND FALL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

First, because *Decline and Fall* deals magnificently with some of the big issues that one should think about if one is trying to understand how Europe, and the West more generally, have come to be how they are today. It is difficult to think of many bigger questions about one's civilisation than how it was shaped by Rome and its Empire, how this Empire fell, how its legacy nonetheless continued, and how many of the new nations, states, and cultures to which Europeans belong today emerged out of its collapse. We may no longer have the same sense of a major historical fissure in the fifth century that Gibbon had, or the same pejorative sense of a 'decline' (though Gibbon was also far

too subtle to see things so simply), but that he was writing about momentous events, the ripples of which can still be felt, is undeniable. And even if, with modern historians, we differ from him in our interpretations, he can still make us think about these things in ways which create useful pictures in our minds about who we are and where we have come from.

Second, as a 'philosophic' historian, Gibbon raises general issues still pertinent in the present day: the sense of decline, the clash of cultures, the impact of mass migration, the loss of empire, the disappearance of one religion and the emergence of another, the feeling that one is living at the end of an old civilisation. It is difficult to read *Decline and Fall* without thinking from new angles about the impact of the loss of colonial empires, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the relationship between Christian Europe and other cultures, demographic decline, and many other contemporary issues. A comment of Gibbon's like the following – about the dilemma faced in 375 by Emperor Valens, who ruled the Eastern Empire, in responding to a request by Goths wishing to settle within the Roman Empire to escape from marauding Huns – throws one right into the heart of our contemporary reaction to the massive non-European immigration that Gibbon clearly assumed was unrepeatable:

> The most experienced statesman of Europe has never been summoned to consider the propriety, or the danger, of admitting, or rejecting, an innumerable multitude of Barbarians, who are driven by despair and hunger to solicit a settlement on the territories of a civilised nation. (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 1047)

In the eighteenth century, there was little or no sense that such civilisational collapse might be just round the corner. Even Gibbon, with his distrust of general laws and theories, was firmly convinced that barbarism, once extinguished, would never return, that the negative consequences of the fall of Rome had only been temporary, and that one could be confident 'that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race' (Gibbon, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 516). In the twentieth century, 'the most murderous (one) in history', according to Eric Hobsbawm, many people were no longer so sure, not least because of two world wars, tyrannies the like of which even the Roman Empire had not seen, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West,* George Orwell's *1984,* Jean Raspail's *Le Camp des saints,* Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission,* Boualem

Sansal's *2084,* and not to forget, in their more subtle ways, Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* or T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* are all testimony to a sense of civilisational fragility and collapse that can only renew one's interest in what happened to Rome in the fifth century and Constantinople in the fifteenth, why it happened and what ensued. In 1931, Ezra Pound, looking back over the past, saw three main 'breaks' or collapses in the course of history which had implications for literature. The first was the fall of Alexander the Great's Macedonian Empire, the second was the fall of the Roman Empire, and the third, the withering of the Italian Renaissance in the early sixteenth century. In all cases, he wrote, 'human lucidity appears to have approached … a sort of maximum, and then suffered a set-back' (Pound, 1931, p. 54). There have been an increasing number of occasions in recent years when I have not been alone in wondering whether we were heading for a fourth.

Third, *Decline and Fall* is worth reading for the sense of engagement it gives one both with Gibbon the man and the historian who is writing it. Gibbon is omnipresent in his text, insinuating into it his own views and prejudices, mocking both others and himself, and as Christopher Kelly has put it, seeing history-writing as 'a form of intellectual warfare', whether against other historians or against the ideas and attitudes revealed in the course of his narrative (Kelly, 1997, p. 46). As with his literary hero Pascal, his enjoyment in imposing order on a mass of information or demolishing potential opponents is palpable. Gibbon is also a surprisingly modern, indeed postmodern, historian in being very clear that, although rules about truth and accuracy remain, 'the past' is very much an artefact constructed by the historian and will inevitably differ from one historian to another. The sense that one is witnessing one man's heroic attempt to weave a vast tapestry which tells one both about the world and about himself is one of the reasons why, as Iggy Pop no less has found, *Decline and Fall* remains so captivating.

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

Anyone who has felt a sense of relationship developing with the author of *Decline and Fall* is likely to be interested in reading Gibbon's autobiography. At his death, six different versions had been made, the subsequent use of which has been less than happy. Gibbon's close friend Lord Sheffield published a version after his death adapted, in the charged atmosphere of the French Revolutionary Wars, to minimise Gibbon's Francophilia and soften his anti-clericalism.

It was only when Gibbon's papers were sold to the British Museum in 1894 that a ban on a full publication was removed, at which point an edition with all six versions was published (Bowersock, 2009, p. 49; Roberts, 2014, pp. 154–156). Although useful for scholars, this was unmanageable for the general reader, and in 1966, Georges Bonnard produced a version that put together elements from the different versions while inserting in an appendix sections not used in the main body of the text (Gibbon, 1966). This formed the basis for the Penguin edition of 1984 (Gibbon, 1984).

Both these editions have been criticised by Gibbon scholars for giving a false view of the coherence of Gibbon's text, though it is difficult to see what the alternative is when preparing a version for those who have neither the time nor the interest in reading all the drafts of an unfinished work. The fact that Gibbon produced so many versions seems evidence not just of his wish to prepare carefully the face with which he wished to be seen by the world but also of his awareness that writing the story of his own life was fraught with the same methodological and epistemological difficulties that he had faced in writing the history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

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7

WALTER SCOTT'S WAVERLEY (1814)

SCOTT THE 'IMMORTAL' AND THE SPREAD OF WALTERSKOTYZM

Following the death of Walter Scott (1771–1832) on 21st September 1832, many newspapers in Britain, the USA, and France appeared with black edging in a gesture of respect for a man who at that time was indubitably the most famous contemporary writer not just in the British Isles but also in Europe and throughout the English-speaking world. It was an honour in Britain previously reserved for monarchs (Rigney, 2012, pp. 8, 167–168; Sutherland, 1995, p. 335).

Scott had begun his literary career as a hugely popular and financially highly successful poet, but having been offered and declined the post of Poet Laureate, turned his attention to historical novels and, beginning with *Waverley* in 1814, published twenty-six of them over the next twelve years, once again continuously breaking all publishing records. Queues formed outside bookshops and people could be seen on the streets reading the latest novel on the morning of publication. The English wit Sydney Smith described the appearance of a new Scott novel as a 'holiday for the whole kingdom' (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 235, 252). So popular were these 'Waverley Novels' that one has the impression that everyone within the country's literate classes was reading the same succession of books and, in doing so, engaging in a collective exercise to re-shape its perception of its own past. For Thomas Carlyle, these novels, 'faster written and better paid for than any other books in the world' were 'the universal reading, looked for like an annual harvest, by all ranks' and not just in Britain but 'in all European countries' (Carlyle, 1899, pp. 60, 73). This is despite the fact that, in Britain, hardback copies of the novels could cost the huge sum of thirty shillings and even paperback versions, when they finally appeared from the 1820s and 1830s onwards, were still sold at five shillings, which was too expensive for most people (Rigney, 2012, pp. 4–5;

Kelly, 2010, p. 13; Fischer, 2003, p. 279).[40] Apart from the Duke of Wellington, who had allegedly saved the nation from Napoleon, Scott was 'the most pictured and busted man of the age'. His wax effigy, resplendent in its kilt and sporran, had pride of place at Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London.

As the reaction to his death in other countries indicated, Scott's fame and impact were not confined to the British Isles. In France, a third of the novels published in 1830 were by Scott, and in 1831, there were more paintings in the Paris Salon inspired by Scott's novels than by the Bible and classical mythology combined. A long line of carriages stood outside the bookshop in Paris on the morning of the release of *Quentin Dorward* and tartan dresses became all the rage (Pittock, 2006, p. xi; Wright, 2006, p. 297; Sutherland, 1995, p. 264). The Waverley Novels were rapidly translated into the main European languages and increasingly into the minor ones: French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Swedish, Danish, and Russian versions of *Waverley,* for example, appearing before Scott's death in 1832, with some of them running into multiple editions (including nine in German) (Scott, 1981, p. xxxi; Reitemeier, 2006, p. 98). Scott's stories were also quick to be turned into operas: Rossini's *La donna del lago* (1819), Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche* (1825), Donizetti's *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (1829), Michele Carafa's *Le nozze di Lammermoor* (1829), with over eighty more to follow in subsequent years (Rigney, 2012, p. 62; Tambling, 2006). Even more significantly, Scott's interest in the past, theory of history, distinctive literary style, and choice of the novel as his main literary form were having a major influence on many other writers, within the British Isles and elsewhere throughout both Europe and the English-speaking world. Hugo, Balzac, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Thackeray, Manzoni, Galdós, Fontane, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Mickiewicz and, among historians, Augustin Thierry and Macaulay, all admired and were influenced by him. Such was his influence on the Polish literary scene that the term *walterskotyzm* ('walterscottism') was coined to describe it. Even those writers who did not like him, such as Tolstoy, were influenced by him against their will (Pittock, 2006, *passim*; Rigney, 2012, pp. 224–225; Modrzewska, 2006, p. 190; Altshuller, 2006, pp. 225–226).

[40] The nineteenth century saw a considerable expansion in circulating and subscription libraries, which had begun to flourish in the eighteenth century (Williams, 2017, pp. 96, 111, 114). Some of these were non-profit associations. There were also many book clubs organised by local and friendship groups, as well as second-hand bookshops. Many of Scott's avid readers who could not afford to buy copies of his novels were able to read them in this way.

It was a commonplace on Scott's death, and again in 1871 at the time of the elaborate trans-national celebrations for the centenary of his birth, to describe him as 'immortal'. Within a short time of his death, a subscription had started for the creation of a permanent physical memorial fitting for a writer regarded by some as in the same league as Shakespeare. It was a comparison Scott, much more realistic and self-deprecating about his own achievements, was quick to deride, 'not fit to tie his brogues' being his own judgement on his relationship with a predecessor, references to whose plays permeate the Waverley Novels (Kelly, 2010, p. 31). By 1846, this had led to the erection of the 200-foot Scott Monument, which still dominates Edinburgh's main thoroughfare to this day, advertised to tourists as 'the largest monument to a writer in the world' but, when I last saw it, looking slightly the worse for wear and, given the decline in Scott's reputation, increasingly *de trop*. New York followed in 1872 with a larger-than-life statue in Central Park where Shakespeare, Burns, and (a more recent addition) Hans Christian Andersen keep him company.

Much more pervasive, however, are the reminders of Scott, his novels, and their characters to be found in the innumerable place names, mostly dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, that are testimony to the extraordinary literary phenomenon with which he is associated. There are towns called 'Waverley' in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and in 22 US states; districts called 'Waverley' in Melbourne, Dunedin, Cape Town, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, and Johannesburg; countless 'Waverley' streets (and a 'Waverley Lane' in Calcutta); as well as hotels, schools and other public venues, not forgetting Edinburgh's main railway station. Between the ages of four and eight, I lived in Newcastle-under-Lyme in an inter-war, semi-detached house called 'Waverley', without ever knowing why it had obtained this name and later forgetting completely that this – rather than 'Number 15' – had been its name. Thirty years later, I found myself living in a house in Edinburgh's Waverley Park conservation area (and member of its committee) and was conscious, as I walked and drove around the city that was my home for sixteen years, that it also possessed a Waverley Steps, Bridge, Gate, Drive, Terrace, Road (×2), and Crescent, and that, if in need of refreshment, one could always drop in to the Waverley Bar or the Old Waverley Hotel. Near where I now live in Surrey, a row of small late Victorian houses all named after Scott's works – Waverley, Ivanhoe, Kenilworth, Peveril, St Ronans, Marmion, and so on – continually remind me of his central place in nineteenth-century British culture. It was just the same when I used to go weekly to Winchester

to visit one of my grandsons whose school was just round the corner from yet another Ivanhoe Terrace.

It is not surprising that it was in Edinburgh that I first read *Waverley* – dutifully at a time when, as an Englishman, I was about to teach Scottish students about Scottish history – though with much less enthusiasm than I was to read it later on. The paperback American Signet Classic edition that I used at that time had an alien feel to it, though I see now that I put marginal pencil marks against quite a few passages of interest and wrote quite extensive notes, again only in pencil, about the book's main themes inside the back cover. It is a response to reading that I often adopted in my twenties and thirties, irrespective of whether I would be making any use of the book in my teaching, and one that I had largely forgotten about. I cannot remember in this case referring to it at any point in my rather ineffective teaching of Scottish history. It was not my notes on the book, however, which interested me when I pulled it off my shelves recently but the aura it had of a time in my life long past, having just married, expecting a first child, taking up a new job, living in temporary accommodation, finding my way round Edinburgh, realising I had come to live in a country I did not really know (Rigney, 2012, p. 1; Kelly, 2010, p. 9).

THE VERDICT OF POSTERITY

Given Scott's status, presence, and influence in his own time and for much of the rest of the nineteenth century – and the full extent of his literary, cultural, and political influence is yet to be discussed here – the contrast with his reputation in the early twenty-first century could not be greater. It is difficult not to agree with the scholar and Scott devotee John Henry Raleigh, Professor of English at Berkeley, writing in 1963, that '[n]ever before or since in Western culture has a writer been such a power in his own day and so negligible to posterity' and with Harry Shaw, Professor of English at Cornell, that the Waverley novels are 'the least-appreciated and least-read body of major fiction in English' (Raleigh, 1963, p. 7; Shaw, 1983, p. 10).

Scott was not without his critics even at the height of his fame. These increased in number following his death, with Carlyle very much in the lead, arguing as early as 1838 in a brilliantly written essay that Scott, though hugely talented and with a 'general healthiness of mind' – by comparison, for example, with Byron – was not deep, had 'nothing spiritual in him', showed no signs of

'opinions, emotions, principles, doubts, beliefs, beyond what the intelligent country gentleman can carry along with him', and, overall, lacked anything 'that could be called great' (Carlyle, 1899, pp. 35, 38, 74–75, 77). Not without some biographical justification, given Scott's social aspirations, he sardonically characterised him as 'writing daily with the ardour of a steam-engine, that he might make £1,500 a year' in order to buy 'farms' and 'upholstery' (Carlyle, 1899, pp. 73, 83; Sutherland, 1995, p. 225).

Nietzsche in 1875 was having Scott read to him by his sister when he needed to rest his eyes and still calling him an 'immortal', a term which Schopenhauer had used of him and which Nietzsche felt was still appropriate 'so much do I like his artistic tranquillity, his *andante*'. While recommending Scott to his friend, the classical scholar Erwin Rohde, he was, however, 'apologetic, almost ashamed', observing that 'what strikes a chord for me does not always affect you; because you think more quickly and sharply than I do'. As Richard Maxwell, commenting on this, puts it, Scott had become 'the classic entertainment of the convalescent', someone with whom one lies back and rests one's eyes, not someone who makes one think. Ruskin and Karl Marx made similar use of Scott as a sickbed author. In the case of Marx – someone who also read the Waverley novels to his children by the fireside – Scott was the only author he felt capable of reading while suffering from a carbuncle (Maxwell, 2001, pp. 421, 424, 464).

Henry James, taking a different tack but similarly undermining Scott's reputation, dismissed his works as 'capital books to read', chiefly suitable for children (Rigney, 2012, p. 237). Mark Twain went further, suggesting that his books had actively negative effects, blaming Scott for the US Civil War and alleging that 'he did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote', while rubbing in his contemporary irrelevance by naming a derelict paddle steamer after him in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) (Kelly, 2010, pp. 150–151). In the twentieth century, E. M. Forster relegated him to the status of storyteller, dismissing him devastatingly as having 'a trivial mind and a heavy style', and F. R. Leavis, proponent of the idea of the 'Great Tradition' of the English novel, saw him as very much part of a *bad* tradition and therefore not to be taken seriously (Rigney, 2012, pp. 214, 216; Robertson, 2012, p. 95). Even in Hungary, where Scott had been a nineteenth-century sensation, the scholar and librarian Zoltán Ferenczi wrote that 'a hundred years after his death, Scott's books are placed on the highest shelves of libraries, with the exception of those volumes put on the lowest ones, so as to be within the reach of children'. Ninety years

later, the expert on Scott's Hungarian reception reported that, at the beginning of 2006, 'neither the earlier nor the more recently published novels of Scott were available in any of the country's major bookshops' (Szamosi, 2006, pp. 170, 172). Even in the USSR and East Germany, where Scott continued to be highly regarded and widely read (with his twenty-volume collected works in Russia, published 1960–1965, proving so popular and the bookshop queues so long that a special night service had to be instituted to cope with the demand), the same level of interest does not seem to have survived the fall of Communism, with most post-1990 versions in Germany being simply reissues of earlier editions (Altshuller, 2006, pp. 238–9; Bautz, 2006). The bicentenaries of Scott's death (1932) and birth (1971) were both marked, though these did little more than draw attention to the fact that, outside the world of 'professional heritage managers' – academics, archivists, and librarians – Scott had become 'the Great Unread' (Rigney, 2012, pp. 210–214).

DESCENDING STILL LOWER: SCOTT IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

If one felt that Scott's reputation could fall no lower, Irvine Welsh, the contemporary Scottish writer whose reputation comes nearest to that of Scott (in the sense of the range of genres in which he works and the number of languages into which his writings have been translated), in conversation with John Mullan at the *Guardian*'s Book Group (where else!), has denied that Scott had any literary significance, dismissing him as 'just an arse-licker to the Prince Regent'. It is a comment which tells one more about Welsh's literary criticism and the way he assumes that biographical information should shape literary judgements than it does about Scott (who, incidentally, was also a prolific and subtle literary critic and editor of multi-volume editions of the writings of Dryden and Swift) (Kelly, 2010, p. 33).

But, before seeing what we can salvage of Scott's reputation, one must 'descend lower', as T. S. Eliot advised in *Four Quartets,* and face without blinking the Gorgons in the abyss into which Scott's reputation has fallen. There are two contemporary references to Scott with which to conclude the introduction to this chapter.

The first is from Irvine Welsh's literary coterie and from the editor of the radical Scottish literary magazine *Rebel Inc.*; Kevin Williamson was quick (quite rightly) to recognise Welsh's talent and publish his work, but wrote on

his blog that Scott was 'an arse-licking royalist' (whether the literary influence here is from Welsh to Williamson or Williamson to Welsh is for better literary critics than I am to determine), 'a falsifier of Scottish history and a Tory cunt of the worst order', supplementing his invective with photographs of himself dancing on Scott's grave. As Stuart Kelly, in *Scott-land,* comments: 'Burns was a tax collector; James Hogg, the 'Ettrick Shepherd' was a Tory; and Hugh MacDiarmid once expressed the hope that the Luftwaffe would flatten London; none of them is treated as a pariah' (Kelly, 2010, p. 33).

The second – a reference to Scott in fiction – signals indifference and neglect rather than outright hostility. In Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001), one of the characters, Chip, a confused academic, scrambles around on the last mailing day before Christmas grabbing books off his shelves to send to relatives (Rigney, 2012, p. 78). The one destined for his nine-year-old nephew, Caleb, is an Oxford annotated edition of Scott's *Ivanhoe,* which Chip was pleased to find on his shelves still in its original plastic book jacket. The dig at Scott is three-fold: Chip owns a copy of *Ivanhoe* but, as might be expected in the case of a novel by a boring old has-been like Scott, has never even got round to looking inside it; nothing more tedious for a nine-year-old can be imagined than being given a copy of *Ivanhoe* as a Christmas present (despite the fact that thousands of nine-year-olds in the past read Scott with enjoyment, George Eliot devouring *Waverley* with passion at the age of eight, Dostoevsky reading all Scott's novels during a single vacation at the age of twelve, and Karen Blixen translating passages from Scott into Danish at the same age); and *ergo* that a Scott novel stands for everything musty, faded, and passé (Altshuller, 2006, p. 228; Deakin, 1913, p. 19; Vargas Llosa, 2006, p. 145). Better, one feels, to be called 'a Tory cunt of the worst order' (the word 'Tory' needs to be pronounced in a particular kind of Scottish accent familiar to those used to British political discourse, in order to stimulate the strongest negative reaction on the part of any Scott defender) than to be told that one of one's favourite writers has been shrink-wrapped and embalmed.

This chapter will therefore try to answer three questions suggested by the above. Why did the Waverley Novels have such an extraordinary reception in the first half of the nineteenth century? Why has there been such an adverse reaction since? Why am I arguing that there is not just a case, but a very strong case, for still reading Scott today?

In order to answer these questions, after briefly looking at Scott the man, one must define what is distinctive about Scott's novels and about *Waverley* in particular.

SCOTT THE MAN

Walter Scott was born in the cramped conditions of the Old Town of Edinburgh into a middle-class family, his father a Writer to the Signet (solicitor), Presbyterian, and Whig, his mother an Episcopalian. He was the third son of the family and the ninth child to be born, five of whom had already died before him. Being lame and sickly as a baby, he was sent for some years to live on a farm with his paternal grandparents and two unmarried aunts, an experience of affection and of the rhythms and traditions of the Scottish countryside that appears to have stood him in good stead, as man and writer, for the rest of his life.

He was brought back to Edinburgh when his parents moved to the healthier and more elegant conditions of its recently constructed New Town. Here, he encountered the contrast between a father who looked back with nostalgia to the days of John Knox and kept a strict Sabbath observance and the relaxed atmosphere of his mother's dressing room, where he was encouraged to read Homer and Shakespeare. He opted for the latter of these two worlds, ending up an Episcopalian, Tory, and writer of poems and novels. His formal education was at the Edinburgh High School – which mostly seemed to consist of Latin grammar, prose, and translations, with Cicero the main author – and at Edinburgh University, after which he followed his father into the law but as an Advocate (barrister) rather than solicitor (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 21–22).

Moving in smart Edinburgh society, he was driven by a desire to acquire the aristocratic connections, which, in a world dominated by the power of patronage, were the key to advancement. He was remarkably successful in doing this, obtaining the sinecure of Sheriff of Selkirkshire (appointing a deputy to actually do the job) and the post of Clerk of Session (some of which he had to do himself but which left him with long tracts of the year when he was free of duties). These posts gave him enough money to enable him, even after his marriage to a French woman with aristocratic connections and the birth of their children, to launch himself into a literary career, as editor, essayist, historian, poet, and, in due course, novelist.[41] At this, he was even more successful, developing a routine of rising at 5 a.m., writing from 6 to

[41] Scott was also the founder in 1809 of the Tory *Quarterly Review,* a rival to the Whig *Edinburgh Review.* He contributed articles and reviews to this magazine, including some anonymous (and generally positive) ones about his own publications.

9 a.m., and spending the rest of the day on legal work, reading, socialising, and, once he began to acquire property, being a gentleman farmer.

His initial reputation as a writer was established through his poetry, despite sometimes thinking, as Plato before him had done, that writing poetry was not a serious occupation for serious men. Once he turned to novels, he admitted having found the writing of poetry hard work. Writing a novel, by contrast, was 'fun' (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 145, 171). But it was poetry, and poetry about the distant past, a world of minstrels, battles, castles, aristocratic ladies, border skirmishes, and chivalry, where he first made his name as a writer. Eight long poems of this kind emerged from his pen before he turned to novels. The response from the reading public and from many, if not all, critics was overwhelmingly positive. Sales, already huge for volumes of verse, got bigger and bigger: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel,* published in 1805, sold 15,000 copies within five years; *Marmion,* published in 1808, reached 13,000 copies in only six months; and *The Lady of the Lake,* published in 1810, went rapidly through five editions and had sold 30,000 copies by the end of the first year (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 105, 125, 144). The long-term critical response to the poetry has been less favourable than to the best of his novels.

The genesis of his first novel, *Waverley,* became one of the 'fables of creation' that John Sutherland, Scott's modern biographer, sees as surrounding Scott's authorship. Both Scott and his son-in-law and biographer John Lockhart claimed that it was started as early as 1805, at which time Scott had put together 'some seven chapters', shown them to a critical friend and, in light of the response, 'thrown (them) aside', putting them in his writing desk. On subsequently moving to Abbotsford, the splendid new home he had built for himself with the proceeds of his writing, the desk had been replaced with a new one and put away in an attic where it and its contents were forgotten about until Scott, searching for some fishing tackle for a guest, remembered that he used to keep flies and lines in his old desk and, in looking for them, stumbled again upon the manuscript. The scene, complete with fishing rods and Scott's favourite dog, was immortalised in a painting by C. M. Hardie, RSA. Subsequent textual analysis of *Waverley* suggests that this was yet another of Scott's fictions, the novel almost certainly having been started five years later in 1810, inspired by the huge success of *The Lady of the Lake* with its Highland setting, and re-started in 1813, with Volume 1 being completed in 1813–1814 and the whole of Volumes 2 and 3 written, with a speed that was to become Scott's trademark, in the course of three weeks in July 1814.

Waverley's enormous success inspired Scott to write further novels. These continued to pour forth from his pen (and, very occasionally when unwell, from his dictation) throughout the following eighteen years right up to his death in 1832. Even during the final months of his life, during an ill-fated continental journey and when desperately ill, he was inspired by a visit to Malta to embark, against all advice, on a further novel, *The Siege of Malta,* which was only published for the first time in 2008.

In 1826, his publisher Constable & Co. and his printer Ballantyne & Co., to both of which he was closely linked financially, crashed, leaving Scott bankrupt. To avoid the shame of this, which he felt deeply, and to avoid having to leave his beloved Abbotsford, he managed to exempt himself from a public declaration to that effect, making arrangements instead to repay his creditors via a trust. For the rest of his life, he wrote to pay off his debts and was in sight of doing so when he died. One of his major projects of these final years was the twelve-volume *The Life of Napoleon* that he managed to write in not much more than twelve months amidst financial collapse, physical pain, the death of his wife Charlotte, and problems with his children.

One of his greatest triumphs in the final decade of his life was to orchestrate, at short notice, the visit of the new King George IV to Scotland in 1822. Scott had come to know the King, a reader of his novels, when he was still Prince Regent, had been the first person to be knighted by him when he took over the throne in 1820, had recommended the visit, and was the obvious candidate to be appointed its 'adviser general'. He worked himself into the ground to ensure that the visit was a success and that it helped to strengthen the Union, which he so strongly supported. It was an event-packed programme full of ceremony – exhausting, complained the King – which did much to establish a certain kilt and tartan image of Scotland, which has lasted in some quarters until the present day.

SCOTT AND THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

Whatever one thinks about Scott's literary merits, his literary impact – and not just his sales figures, global spread, or direct influence on other writers – is beyond doubt. Carlyle, who denied that Scott had any significant message to deliver to his readers, was not in any doubt that he was the 'highest literary man' of the first half of the nineteenth century, 'immeasurably beyond all others connected with the world's ear' (Carlyle, 1899, p. 54). Before Scott,

in the eyes of the male critics who policed the 'Republic of letters' in his time – a restrictive *champ littéraire* that Bourdieu would have recognised – the novel as genre was very much a literary outsider, seen as insufficiently serious and, in general, more appropriate for women given its generally domestic and sentimental focus. By writing about the public, alongside the private, and by focusing, among other matters, on political intrigues, battles, and outdoor adventures, Scott was felt to have rescued the novel for maleness. 'Manliness' and 'healthiness' were often mentioned in connection with Scott's writing (Ferris, 1991, pp. 1–2, 90–1, 94, 99, 238; Kelly, 2010, p. 299; Duncan, 1992, p. 2; Bourdieu, 1992).

At a time when historical writing was still seen as a branch of literature, and its status was high, Scott enhanced that of the novel through all the historical paraphernalia (prefaces, footnotes, and in the 48-volume 1829–1833 Magnum Opus edition, supplementary documentation) included in his novels and which signalled the author as a man of learning (Rigney, 2001, pp. 27, 42–45). Even more important, perhaps, was the pervasive allusiveness to the non-modern and non-novelistic European literary canon woven throughout Scott's writing. Scott was extraordinarily well-read and well-informed, with an extremely powerful verbal memory, and unafraid to make use of his learning in ways that often deepened the meaning and enhanced the polyphonic nature of his novels while also providing him with opportunities to send up his own bookishness. He may have dashed off novels with extraordinary speed – three in each of 1815–1816, 1819, and 1823 – and sometimes with far less care than he had exercised with *Waverley,* but all were informed by his extraordinarily well-stocked mind. J. H. Alexander's analysis of the 27 novels has shown, as well as 3,000 references to the Bible, 1,900 to Shakespeare, c. 85 to Virgil, 80 to Horace, 60 to Cervantes, 50 to Chaucer, and 40 to Homer, with Aesop, Cicero, Juvenal, Ariosto, Ben Jonson, Spenser, and Milton also making appearances among the earlier writers quoted (Alexander, 2017, pp. 114–116, 126, 140–148; Ferris, 1991, p. 85; Sutherland, 1995, p. 122). For many of his critics and readers, Scott had given the novel a new seriousness.

The second major literary impact of the Waverley Novels was to place the historical novel, at least for the time being, at the centre of the literary scene. Writers before Scott had set their stories in the past but not with the same sense of the historicity of experience and of the otherness of the past or with the purpose of probing and understanding the nature of that past, assessing its legacy, and developing what, appropriately in Scott's case, has been described as 'a theory of history' (Shaw, 1983, pp. 25–26; Kelly, 2010, p. 108). Although

Scott is often associated with Romanticism, given his literary inventiveness, his sense of the loss that occurs with historical change, and his fascination with the specificities of time and place and with the distant past and the oral traditions of 'primitive' peoples, he is at the same time very much a son of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and in particular of its Scottish (and more specifically Edinburgh) variant associated with David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Dugald Stewart, and William Robertson. From these mentors, some of whom were his teachers, when a student at Edinburgh University, or his New Town neighbours, he acquired a sense of the fundamental identity of human nature across the world (though only at the base, thus leaving plenty of room for the infinite variety of human experience, which was his main interest), of the way men and women are profoundly shaped by their societies, and, perhaps most importantly for his novels, of history as a process that goes through different stages and is, in its essence, progressive (Duncan, 2007, pp. 101, 137; Ferris, 1991, p. 205; Shaw, 1983, pp. 138–139; Robertson, 2012, pp. 95–98; C. Jones, 2012, p. 64; Sutherland, 1995, pp. 42, 47).

Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since, his first novel, provided a template for many of the other historical novels that were to follow. Set in 1745–1746, at the time of the second unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion, the novel focuses on the experiences of the young Edward Waverley, a soldier in the government army but from an old English Jacobite family who drifts from one side to the other and ends up, without much exercise of will, fighting for Bonnie Prince Charlie. As with many of Scott's other novels, the hero is neither one thing nor the other – appropriately 'wavering' at many points, as Scott himself sometimes did on Anglo-Scottish relations – thus enabling the reader to see the emerging situation from different points of view. For Scott's biographer John Sutherland, Edward Waverley was Scott's 'despised self', someone who lived in eventful times but who saw history as something that was being made around him rather than by him, a bit like The Good Soldier Schweik (Sutherland, 1995, pp. 173–174). The novel explores the nature of civil conflict, the clash between different cultures (in this case, Highlanders and Lowlanders, Scots and English), the tension between tradition and 'modernisation', and the competing appeals of idealism, self-interest, and common sense.

Scott's novels are 'polyphonic' in that he presents a range of different views and perspectives, not least within some of the main characters themselves. They are also 'polyphonic' in that Scott, while allowing a certain sense to emerge of where he stands – which is generally to accept the inevitability and benefits of the modernising changes taking place – acknowledges that

there are cultural losses and is keen to hang on to the memory of what is passing away. He does not come off the fence on the different versions of the truth he lays out, leaving readers free to make up their own minds and work out what they think might be lurking behind the frequent authorial irony or the epigraphs that look as if they might be there to hint at his views (or might not). Many of the negative images of Scott – that he is pushing a particular aristocratic or Tory agenda, promoting a picture-postcard image of Scotland, soaked in bogus medievalism, wallowing in nostalgia for lost causes, failing to appreciate the complexities of historical situations – do not stand up to close scrutiny.

Though not without his enmities and occasional acts of meanness, Scott was also renowned for his sociability and bonhomie in actual life and, in his fictions, had a strikingly wide range of sympathies in relation to his characters, one contemporary reviewer imagining him 'shak(ing) hands with (his characters) as his oldest and best acquaintances' (Ferris, 1991, p. 245). Carlyle, who criticised his novels for being 'altogether addressed to the every-day mind', still saw them as expressive of 'a wider sympathy for man' than could be found hardly anywhere else (Carlyle, 1899, pp. 74–75). Scott's novels include people from across the social spectrum (as in his favourite Shakespearean history plays to which he constantly alludes) and he had a particular capacity to identify with the marginalised, disempowered and subordinate and, as a Scot, with the ethnic underdog (Lincoln, 2007, p. 14; Rigney, 2012, p. 220). This was one reason why, at a time when Scott had elsewhere largely fallen out of fashion, he received such praise from the Hungarian Marxist literary historian György Lukács in his influential 1937 work *The Historical Novel,* written while Lukács was living in the USSR. Lukács had no illusions about Scott's generally conservative outlook but saw what many others failed to do, which was that Scott had an acute sense of the way lives were determined by social and historical forces yet, at the same time, of how ordinary people, caught up in these processes, could nonetheless help to shape their own destiny. Lukács also saw how, while satisfying his readers' demand for 'romance', Scott presents us with heroes who are the very negation of Romanticism. The enthusiasm of Lukács for Scott was one reason why his novels were so popular before 1990 in Russia and East Germany, and why *Ivanhoe* was the favourite novel of Ho chi Minh, who was living in Russia at the same time as Lukács, as it also was, maybe not for the same reasons, of Tony Blair (Rigney, 2012, p. 36; Kelly, 2010, p. 166; Szamosi, 2006, pp. 164–165; Ch. Jones, 2007; Robertson, 2012, p. 95).

SCOTT THE POSTMODERNIST

The historical novel, as developed by Scott, is marked by the blurring of the boundary between fictional narrative and historical fact, with historical figures and actual events depicted alongside invented characters and a largely fictional plot. His aim, in terms of historical representation, was to be 'true to meaning', but he made no claims to be 'true to actuality' (Rigney, 2012, pp. 26, 36). Indeed, he frequently goes out of his way to draw attention to the fictional nature of his writing. He does this through all the paratextual apparatus (prefaces, notes, epigraphs, postscripts, imaginary manuscripts), which often accompanies the Waverley Novels, as well as through explicit reflection on the task of authorship (the first chapter of *Waverley* is largely a discussion about the kind of fiction that readers are about to encounter and how it compares with other types of fiction that Scott has decided not to write). There is also a great deal of direct authorial comment, which encourages the reader to stand back from and reflect on the events and characters being depicted. His tone is frequently ironic, as in the way he distances himself and his readers from expected happy endings (Alexander, 2017, p. 2; Rigney, 2012, p. 87; Lincoln, 2007, pp. viii, 19; Brown, 1979, p. 9). The fact that Scott did not admit until 1827 that he was the author of these novels, all of them going out under the name of 'The Author of *Waverley*', also helped to focus attention on the fact that they were the constructions of an Unknown Hand about whose identity there could be endless speculation (though long before the end of Scott's silence it had become very much an open secret).

All this emphasis on fictionality and self-reflexivity, together with Scott's blurring of fact and fiction, his deliberate ambiguities, and the way he presents different versions of history and alternative understandings of truth, has led some critics within the academic literary commentariat to draw attention in recent decades to parallels between Scott and postmodernism and to use these as part of an effort to counter the predominantly negative view of Scott that had been promoted by many of their predecessors during most of the twentieth century (Rigney, 2001, pp. 20, 149). It is certainly one reason for making the case that there is much more in Scott than Carlyle, Mark Twain, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Leavis, and James Joyce (who very much disliked Scott and has someone in *Finnegans Wake* 'hivanhoesed', an action whose nature is none too clear, like much in that work, but does not sound pleasant) have led us to believe (Kelly, 2010, pp. 32, 169).

But why has Scott attracted such wildly different responses? First, let us look at the reasons that help to explain the nineteenth-century Scott phenomenon.

THE 'PUSH' AND 'PULL' OF SCOTT'S LITERARY INFLUENCE

Ann Rigney, whose two books on Scott and the Scott phenomenon are among the most perceptive and wide-ranging of recent decades, distinguishes between the 'push' and 'pull' factors which help to explain 'the life of texts in society' (Rigney, 2012, p. 12). A 'push' factor is an element in a text that remains attractive to readers and has the capacity to induce productive responses, which may involve generating new versions of itself or highlighting aspects of it that might have been hidden or downplayed. A 'pull' factor is the active engagement with a text by different groups or later generations who adapt it to meet new ideological, cultural, or aesthetic needs.

In the case of Scott, the 'push' factor must include his descriptive and dramatic powers, the appeal to both male and female tastes, his interest in everyday life, and his concern for the fate of the subordinate and oppressed. Contemporary reviews suggest that it was the novel historical context of his writings that attracted people more than anything else (Rigney, 2001, pp. 52–53). His stories were also able to reassure readers that, despite the contemporary spectre of war and revolution on the continent (*Waverley* came out towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars), major threats against Britain were a thing of the past. Negatively, in terms of literary value, Carlyle attributed the appeal of the novels, at a time when traditional beliefs were under threat, to Scott's willingness to allow the reader 'to lie down at his ease, and be ministered to', something that 'the vast majority of readers so long to do' (Carlyle, 1899, p. 57). This, however, may well be the most unfair of Carlyle's comments and cannot have been true of all readers, as the impact of his novels on many readers suggests.

Corresponding 'pull' factors, for example, help to explain why novels depicting the 'victims of history' (Jacobites, Highlanders, Covenanters, Saxons, etc.) had an appeal to those, such as Hungarians, Slovenes, Czechs, Poles, and Catalans, who felt that their languages and identities were being suppressed (Szaffner, 2006). Novels depicting historical situations of civil and social conflict and cultural difference provided fertile ground for meeting

needs that may not have been in Scott's mind (Pittock, 2006, *passim*). Despite Scott repeatedly implying in his novels that he was on the side of moderation, compromise, and the constituted authorities – he really was a Tory, though not the kind of Tory that Welsh and Williamson, following the ancient traditions of the British Left, love to depict – it comes as no surprise that Metternich's Austria, trying to hold together its multi-ethnic empire, should have banned seventeen of these novels on the grounds that they were subversive (Pittock, 2006, p. 8).

Scott's idea of historical development, as one in which societies moved forward in stages in a largely progressive direction, allowed him to explore and take a particular position with regard to the identities of Scotland and England and their relationship with each other. He was a Scottish patriot with a strong sense of Scotland's distinctive cultural identity, a fascination with its primitive and medieval past, and a desire to keep the memory of that past alive. But, at the same time, and above all, he was a staunch Unionist, seeing the Union as a successful resolution of centuries of conflict between the two countries and a partnership which had helped to free Scotland from a despotic patriarchal social system. He was deeply loyal to the British monarchy, even in the un-prepossessing personage of George IV, a frequent visitor to England and, from *Ivanhoe* (1819) onwards, a writer who wrote more about England's past than he did about Scotland's. The way in which his novels allow a variety of voices to emerge allows them, however, to be read so as to feed into causes that Scott would not have wished to promote, of which the subversion of the Austrian Empire, Britain's recent ally in the war against Napoleon, would certainly have been one. Those who read a Scottish nationalist message into his novels would equally be misrepresenting Scott's own position while quite legitimately drawing on some of the voices that he included within their pages (Kidd, 1993, pp. 255–267).

The 'pull' factor in the case of Scott, and one reason why his works were popularised and turned into plays, musicals, engravings, chapbooks, comics, and children's versions, and even used to help sell wall hangings and crockery, was that his sense of history catered for the needs of an increasingly urban population uprooted from its traditions as a result of demographic and economic change and receptive to a wider story about its origins and identity. Even among those who may only have seen one of the popular theatrical versions of Scott's plays, the existence of a 'Waverley Street' or of a 'Waverley' steamer on the Clyde (its lounge also named after Jeanie Deans, the heroine of *The Heart of Midlothian,* set in the 1730s), evoking memories of

the country's past, provided what the French cultural historian Pierre Nora has called a *lieu de mémoire* – a point of reference and stability amidst rapid change and one that was part of people's everyday lives (Nora, 1986; Rigney, 2012, pp. 7, 17–19, 43, 53, 132). Scott wrote at a time when long-existing national identities were being strengthened under the impact of population movements, expanded communications, and political developments, and his novels played a significant role in shaping these 'imagined communities', in the case of England, Scotland, and the Union, in distinctive ways. Given the extent of the British, and especially Scottish, diaspora, one can imagine how even more powerful such *lieux de mémoire* might have been for some people in Dunedin or Bloemfontein keen to hold on to a sense of the place they had come from and to which they would probably never return. Scott's immense popularity right across the English-speaking world played a part in the emergence in the nineteenth century of the idea of an Anglosphere and of a special relationship between the British Empire and the USA (Rigney, 2012, p. 14).

WHY SCOTT BECAME 'THE GREAT UNREAD'

Some of the reasons why Scott was so popular in his own time and, except among a growing number of critics, for much of the nineteenth century, are the very reasons for his twentieth and twenty-first century neglect. His version of the historical novel, with its prioritising of the social and historical over the individual and personal, the local and national over the universal, and the flow of events over psychological depth, the novelty of which was a major reason for his success, increasingly came to seem outmoded. The novel that he had done so much to push to the centre of the literary scene moved off in a different direction, valuing complexity, interiority, and the idea that what was interesting about people was what was timeless rather than what marked them out as characters shaped by a particular time and place. Historical novels – Lukács and the Marxists aside – came to seem an inferior form of fiction, concerned as Edwin Muir put it in 1932, at the time of the centenary of Scott's death, with 'the mediocre and the trivial' (Rigney, 2012, p. 214).

Given the power of what Rigney calls 'the (self appointed) custodians of patrimony' – people like Edwin Muir, E. M. Forster, Henry James, James Joyce and F. R. Leavis – to establish and police reputation, their fairly universal rejection of Scott in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century meant that Scott defenders, such as G. K. Chesterton,

tended to be pushed to the margins of the critical scene (Kelly, 2010, p. 315). Scott was immensely well-read and intelligent, and enthusiastically bookish but not an intellectual. His novels, as already mentioned, were renowned for their 'healthiness' and 'manliness' (qualities increasingly *démodé*), and he was humorous and generally optimistic about the world's ability to resolve its differences and achieve a measure of human happiness (even more *démodé*). He was also a conservative, Tory, and Unionist – the first two the kiss of death with intellectuals then as now, the third not good news in a country at the time of writing run by the Scottish National Party – and, in addition, had acquired before his name the label 'Sir' with all its negative establishment associations. Above all, he was immensely popular, a highly successful public figure, and therefore ripe for disdain as art, with modernism, increasingly turned its back on accessibility to the common man and woman (Shaw, 1983, p. 138).

As a writer whose novels had helped to mould particular kinds of collective identities, his relevance inevitably suffered as the nature of these identities changed over time. Literature in the twentieth century also ceased to be as central to collective identities as it had been in the time of Scott (or of Dickens, Hugo, Kossuth, Manzoni, and Tolstoy). More generally, especially after the First World War and *a fortiori* the Holocaust, suffering, disasters, and the mourning associated with these, have loomed much larger as markers of collective memory – Nora's *lieux de mémoire* – than cultural heroes (Rigney, 2012, p. 223). Finally, at its most basic level, as the archive of past cultural achievements and the communication of information both increase exponentially, the odds that any particular literary giant will be able to stay in the race for survival get progressively more demanding.

In a fast-paced society, with many other distractions, and with reading habits having undergone major changes, Scott also has a lot stacked against him: the sheer length of most of his novels; their relative lack of pace (appropriate for a world still largely dependent on horses for land transport); his use of dialect, Latin tags, prefaces, and footnotes (skippable but off-putting); his assumptions about background historical knowledge (no longer to be taken for granted among those educated at schools during the last fifty years); his Ciceronian style, following in the traditions of Dryden and Johnson, in which one has to proceed through a number of subordinate clauses before reaching the sentence's main verb and meaning (requiring levels of concentration not always easy among the growing numbers of the syntactically challenged); and finally, the inevitable variability of the writing in places across 27 mostly very

long novels written in less than 20 years (Alexander, 2017, pp. 21–31). Scott's plots, as was pointed out from the beginning, can also sometimes be clumsy and contrived, and the humour not for modern tastes (Scott, 1981, p. xv).

But is Scott worth salvaging for the twenty-first century? I have already suggested that he is, but let me expand on this by way of conclusion.

WHY READ SCOTT TODAY?

Here are two extracts from *Waverley*. In the first, the author, at the beginning of the novel, explains why he had chosen the unfamiliar name of 'Waverley' and, in the supplemental title, simply referred to the date at which the events to be depicted had taken place:

> Had I, for example, announced in my frontispiece, 'Waverley, a Tale of other Days', must not every novel-reader have anticipated a castle scarce less than that of Udolpho, of which the eastern wing had been long uninhabited, and the keys either lost or consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps, about the middle of the second volume, were doomed to guide the hero, or heroine, to the ruinous precints? Would not the owl have shrieked and the cricket cried in the very title-page? And could it have been possible for me, with a moderate attention to decorum, to introduce any scene more lively than that might be produced by the jocularity of a clownish but faithful valet, or the garrulous narrative of the heroine's fille-de-chambre, when rehearsing the stories of blood and horror which she had heard in the servants' hall? Again, had my title borne, 'Waverley, a Romance from the German', what head so obtuse as not to image forth a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke, a secret and mysterious association of Rosycrucians and illuminati, with all their properties of black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark lanterns? Or if I had rather chosen to call my work a 'Sentimental Tale', would it not have been a sufficient presage of a heroine with a profusion of auburn hair, and a harp, the soft solace of her solitary hours, which she fortunately finds always the means of transporting from castle to cottage, although she herself be sometimes obliged to jump out of a two-pair-of-stairs window, and is more than once bewildered on her journey, alone and on foot, without any guide but a blowzy peasant girl, whose jargon she hardly can understand? Or again, if my Waverley had been entitled 'A Tale of the Times', wouldst thou not,

> gentle reader, have demanded of me a dashing sketch of the fashionable world, a few anecdotes of private scandal thinly veiled, and if lusciously painted so much the better; a heroine from Grosvenor Square, and a hero from the Barouche Club or the Four-in-Hand, with a set of subordinate characters from the elegantes of Queen Anne Street East, or the knowing heroes of the Bow-Street Office? (Scott, 2007, pp. 3–4)

This is Scott (as anonymous author at this point) drawing attention to the fact that what follows is a fiction, mocking other contemporary fictional forms as a basis for later standing back and looking at his own with wry detachment, and encouraging his readers to be alert to how their perceptions are being shaped at the same time as absorbing themselves into the narrative. It is a fiction that assumes an understanding of a number of contemporary references, which a good annotated edition will supply, but would not be held up by its absence. The style verges on the orotund but is full of élan and humour.

The second passage is from the novel's penultimate chapter. Waverley, having been extricated by well-placed friends from the mess into which he had got himself as a result of his involvement in the unsuccessful Jacobite rising, marries the daughter of pardoned Lowland Jacobite, the Baron of Bradwardine, whose ancestral home and estates, Tully-Veolan, are restored to him thanks to one of Waverley's wealthy and influential friends. The novel's denouement is a metaphor for Anglo-Scottish reconciliation and for closure in relation to the disturbed epoch of Jacobite-Hanoverian conflict. On visiting Tully-Veolan, renovated following its sacking by the King's troops during the rising, Waverley and Bradwardine enter the dining parlour to find one addition to its former contents, a painting depicting Waverley with his friend Fergus Mac-Ivor, the Highland clan chieftain recently tried and beheaded in the castle at Carlisle.

> There was one addition to this fine old apartment, however, which drew tears into the Baron's eyes. It was a large and animated painting, representing Fergus Mac-Ivor and Waverley in their Highland dress, the scene a wild, rocky, and mountainous pass, down which the clan were descending in the back-ground. It was taken from a spirited sketch, drawn while they were in Edinburgh by a young man of high genius, and had been painted on a full length scale by an eminent London artist. Raeburn himself (whose Highland chiefs do all but walk out of the canvas) could not have done more justice to the subject; and the ardent, fiery, and impetuous character

> of the unfortunate Chief of Glennaquoich was finely contrasted with the contemplative, fanciful and enthusiastic expression of his happier friend. Beside this painting were hung the arms which Waverley had borne in the unfortunate civil war. The whole piece was generally admired. (Scott, 2007, p. 361)

Bringing into the text an imagined visual representation of part of the story that is about to end again highlights the fictional nature of what one has just read. It also brings to the fore the contrast between a life dedicated to a hopeless cause (the Jacobite claim to the throne and the preservation of the doomed Highland way of life) in the case of Mac-Ivor, and one that, in the case of Waverley, has learned to submit to the course of history. Scott is not making a judgement here either on the Jacobites and the old Highland way of life or on Waverley with his sense that the end of the civil war marks the triumph of reason and self-interest. He is leaving the reader to look at the imaginary picture and, in doing so, think back over the relationship between the two men and, in particular, only two chapters previously, their final meeting in a prison in Carlisle just before Fergus's execution. The picture also helps to encapsulate Scott's view of history as something that, even when no longer determining our lives, needs to be remembered and aestheticised, as a reminder of where we have come from and as a source of continuing satisfaction.

While writing this chapter, I have had a postcard-size copy of Raeburn's portrait of Scott, with his solid, reliable face and his gaze focused on something to the left of the viewer, staring out at me from the back of my desk and have come to see in his expression, as part of my 'appropriative reception' of this work of art (if I may be allowed, for once, to lapse ironically into the academic jargon beloved of experts in 'reception studies' that so irritates me, while extending further this Ciceronian sentence), a view of the world that embraces a range of perspectives and is unfazed by divergent responses to his writings, as long as, unlike Welsh and Williamson, they remain within the bounds of that civility and benevolence that was so important to him.

To sum up, therefore, Scott is worth reading, first, because his style, if sometimes overblown and ornamented for modern tastes, is, much of the time, lively, vigorous, allusive, and ironic. His characters range right across the social scale: like his beloved Shakespeare, he has as much interest in the doings of the lowly as of the mighty, a characteristic perfectly compatible with being a Tory. Indeed, his depiction of 'ordinary people' is often very

much more empathetic than that of some of 'the (self appointed) custodians of patrimony' like E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, who, a hundred years later, found no value in his work: compare the depiction of Leonard Bast in Forster's *Howard's End* or Doris Kilman in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* with that of Jeanie Deans in Scott's *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* or Davie Gellatley in *Waverley*) (Carey, 1992, pp. 18–19; Rigney, 2012, pp. 10, 208, 214).[42] Scott's theatricality enables him to produce some very powerful dramatic scenes and his descriptive powers can be impressive. He is able to combine effectively romance and history, private and public. He can appeal successfully to different types of reader, from those keen to disentangle the humour or thematic connections in an allusion to Horace or Ariosto, or deepen their understanding of the Jacobite risings, to those mainly gripped by an exciting story. His interest in the past is never just antiquarian and, as an optimist, moderniser, and public figure in his own time, far from just nostalgic. Many of the historical themes of his novels – civil conflict, cultural differences, the fate of those left behind by the march of history, the importance of cultural memory, collective and national identities – apply not just to the historical periods about which he was writing but to the present day and to many other countries besides Scotland and England. Immersing oneself in previous worlds (Scott's own and the ones imagined by him) can throw interesting new light on contemporary issues.

As a bibliophile and at a time when reading *books* was much more central to educated people's lives than it is today, Scott was unsurprisingly interested in how people read. He drew here on his own childhood experience, characterising it as 'ample' and 'indefatigable' but 'indiscriminating' and to 'little purpose' (Sutherland, 1995, p. 24). This finds its echo in *Waverley* where Edward's early reading is shown as one of the sources of his character and of his inadequacies:

[42] Virginia Woolf's opinion about Scott was not shared by her father, the author and critic Leslie Stephen, who in an 1871 article lamented a younger generation's 'muttered discontent' with Scott. Mr Ramsay, a character based on Leslie Stephen in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse,* worries that his writings may end up like Scott's, no longer read, according to one of his young guests. Picking up Scott's *The Antiquary* to test out whether he felt it was still worth reading, he finds himself moved to tears by a favourite passage and able to forget for the moment his own worries and failures in 'the astonishing delight and feeling of vigour it gave him'. 'That's first-rate', he thought, 'they could not improve on that' (Woolf, 1932, pp. 182–186; Maxwell, 2001, p. 462).

> The library at Waverley-Honour, a large Gothic room, with double arches and a gallery, contained that miscellaneous and extensive collection of volumes usually assembled together, during the course of two hundred years, by a family which have been always wealthy, and inclined of course, as a mark of splendour to furnish their shelves with the current literature of the day, without much scrutiny or nicety of discrimination. Through this ample realm Edward was permitted to roam at large … With a desire of amusement therefore, which better discipline might soon have converted into a thirst for knowledge, young Waverley drove through the sea of books, like a vessel without a pilot or a rudder. Nothing perhaps increases by indulgence more than a desultory habit of reading, especially under such opportunities of gratifying it. I believe one reason why such numerous instances of erudition occur among the lower ranks is, that, with the same powers of mind, the poor student is limited to a narrow circle for indulging his passion for books, and must necessarily make himself master of the few he possesses ere he can acquire more. Edward, on the contrary, like the epicure who only deigned to take a single morsel from the sunny side of a peach, read no volume a moment after it ceased to excite his curiosity or interest; and it necessarily happened, that the habit of seeking only this sort of gratification rendered it daily more difficult of attainment, till the passion for reading, like other strong appetites, produced by indulgence a sort of satiety. (Scott, 2007, pp. 14–15)

In describing Waverley's failure, at the slightest difficulty, to persevere with texts, Scott might also well have been anticipating a time when his own works no longer immediately resonated with contemporary needs and suffered from an aura more likely to repel than to attract. Scott's advice to those whose interest might be flagging, however, goes beyond just urging them not to change allegiances (whether to books or to dynasties) on a whim – a lesson Waverley is slow to learn. It also involves the advocacy of what the narrator of *Redgauntlet,* one of Scott's other Jacobite novels, calls 'the laudable practice of *skipping*', which applies not just to passages felt to be dull but also to obscure words, Latin tags, and anything that gets in the way of one's enjoyment and understanding (Alexander, 2017, p. 58). It should probably also apply to Scott's prefaces, despite Stuart Kelly's view in *Scott-land* that these sometimes represent his most sophisticated observations about literature (Kelly, 2010, p. 218). These are well worth reading, but to those venturing into the

Waverley Novels for the first time, letting oneself be pulled quickly some way into the narrative – which, in my experience, one normally is – comes first.

FURTHER READING

Even if Scott is no longer widely read, he is certainly widely studied. Most of those who have worked in depth on his novels – overwhelmingly university academics – end up, not surprisingly, feeling that their special subject is still worthy of attention. Many of the academic studies of Scott are substantial, serious, and readable. Some, written in a style in which abstract nouns tumble unstoppably over each another, leave a reader like myself, unfamiliar with literary theory, begging after a few paragraphs to be allowed to go back to Scott. The most convoluted of Scott's Ciceronian sentences are instantly decodable by comparison with the following:

> The absurd alderman exposes the King's own status as a facsimile, bound to the inorganic, metaphysically empty spatial and temporal axes of duplication and repetition … charisma is generated by the immanence of the rupture in the convergence, as art and money uncannily double one another … the taxonomy of glory in Scottish history has given way under the inexorable pressures of the teleology of civility. (Duncan, 2007, p. xiii)

> The archaeology of national essentialism practised by Scott. (Pittock, 2006, p. 6)

When Bourdieu, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, Eagleton, and Žižek start getting too many mentions – despite the fact that some of these authors have interesting and relevant things to say – alarm bells ring and one fears the worst. A notable exception is Ina Ferris's *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels,* which refers to five of them, yet remains clear and stimulating. The work I found most useful in helping me to read Scott was J. H. Alexander's *Walter Scott's Books.* Ann Rigney's *The Afterlives of Walter Scott* and, in a more popular vein, Stuart Kelly's *Scott-land* are both excellent on his impact and legacy.

For a biography that recognises the complexity of Scott's character and the widely varying literary merit of his writings, encouraging one to make one's

own judgements about both, John Sutherland's *The Life of Walter Scott* (Sutherland, 1995) is very much recommended. The standard Scott family-approved biography was the ten-volume *Life* by Scott's son-in-law John Lockhart, issued alongside Scott's collected works in a Magnum Opus edition which eventually ran to a 98-volume set. Sutherland makes extensive use of it, while frequently pulling apart its many fictional versions of events designed (mostly) to show Scott in a good light and his enemies in a bad one.

As with all seven authors, having spent a lot of time reading their works and, if only implicitly, judging the degree of affinity I have with them, how their particular consciousness met its final end has always interested me, perhaps morbidly, perhaps irrelevantly, given that my main concern has been with their works. It has not been easy to find out. Cicero and Boethius were, of course, both murdered, with differing accounts of their deaths having been told, all of them shocking and moving. In the case of Plutarch, we are not even certain of the year of his death, and although the date of Sir Thomas Malory's death and his place of burial are recorded, nothing is known of the circumstances. We know a little more about Bunyan's death, supposedly the result of a fever. It is not until we get to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that accounts become fuller. We know a great deal about Gibbon's symptoms, the enormous swelling of his scrotum, his various operations, and the final peritonitis which appears to have killed him. It was a painful decline over many months. Similarly, Scott's last few months – his various strokes, the nightmarish final journey to Malta and Italy amidst a miserable and quarrelling family (their nice thought had been to give him a winter in the sun), the final two months of great suffering, during which at one point he screamed for twenty-six hours non-stop, the drifting in and out of consciousness – are well documented. Lockhart records the final moments:

> As I was dressing on the morning of Monday the 17th of September (1832), Nicolson (Scott's servant) came into my room, and told me that his master had awoke in a state of composure and consciousness, and wished to see me immediately. I found him entirely himself, though in the last extreme of feebleness. His eye was clear and calm – every trace of the wild fire of delirium extinguished. 'Lockhart', he said, 'I may have but a minute to speak to you. My dear, be a good man – be virtuous – be religious – be a good man. Nothing else will give you any comfort when you come to lie here. (Sutherland, 1995, p. 355)

As well as being implausible, these last words have also, as Sutherland shows, been disproved through the existence of a letter from an Evangelical lady asking Lockhart to invent precisely such a scene. Ironically, it is the kind of scene Scott might have included in one of his more hastily written novels (Sutherland, 1995, p. 355).

LINKS TO OTHER NEGLECTED WORKS

The only one of Scott's novels that can perhaps be exempted from being classified as a 'neglected work' is *Ivanhoe,* set in early medieval England, which, as well as being recommended by Tony Blair and Ho Chi Minh, has inspired over a hundred paintings (six from Delacroix alone) and been turned into films, television programmes, plays, circus spectacles, and games (including a collaborative computer game); and in the process transformed beyond recognition. It has attracted less critical attention than other Scott novels, partly, one assumes, because for a long time it has been seen mainly as a children's book suitable for the promotion of proper values, though Sutherland, while seeing it as an interesting 'treatise on nationality', has some harsh words about what he feels to have been its effect in stimulating racial consciousness and legitimising racism and anti-semitism (Rigney, 2001, pp. 56, 79, 104; Watson, 2012, pp. 149, 151; Sutherland, 1995, p. 229).

The other Scott novels (but also *Ivanhoe* too, as a book for adults) are ripe for rediscovery by the general reader. In addition to *Waverley,* the ones that have tended to receive the highest critical acclaim have been *Rob Roy,* another Jacobite novel, *Old Mortality, The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (the only novel that has ever had a football team named after it), and *The Bride of Lammermoor* (the source of Donizetti's famous opera, which I memorably saw performed, with sets by Franco Zeffirelli, from the gods in the Teatro Massimo in Palermo in the early 1970s), with *Guy Mannering* and *The Antiquary* as possible runners-up (Kelly, 2010, p. 154). The definitive version of all the novels is to be found in the thirty-volume Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels. Although available in the London Library, this is not the edition I have been using for my further reading of Scott. When in Edinburgh, after writing most of this chapter, I picked up very cheaply from a second-hand bookshop, popular Victorian editions of eight of the novels I had not previously read. When reading these, I feel closer to the time when Scott was the most famous European novelist, everyone was reading his novels, and almost

every literate home in Edinburgh, where I lived for sixteen years, had at least one or two of them, some of which have now ended up in my library in the south of England. Their attractive bindings and illustrations are an invitation to embark on hours of leisurely reading, imagine who their original owners might have been, and ease myself into that web of connections, which takes me back not just to Scott but to all those other authors whose imprint can be found across his pages.

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8

WHY THE 'GREAT UNREAD'?

The reasons why the seven texts discussed in this book have lost their central place in the cultural life of educated elites in England and, in some cases, in other parts of continental Europe and the USA, are many and varied. Some are highly precise and easily identifiable: for example, how among the classically educated, the nineteenth century saw a shift in interest from Rome to Greece and, within Greece, from later periods to the fifth century BC, and the impact this had on the reputations of Cicero and Plutarch within the wider society. Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* also faded, even more strikingly, from popularity long before the twentieth-century decline in the study of classical languages, partly because of its late Latin style and partly because of the increased availability of other classical texts, which it was felt could better meet the educational needs Boethius's work previously supplied.

In the case of *Le Morte Darthur,* its language became increasingly alien to later readers, and, as a result, a choice emerged between a modernised version, which is highly readable but loses the verve of the original, and an unamended text, which requires resort to a glossary – choice which, in both cases, distances one from what Malory wrote. *Parallel Lives* and *Decline and Fall* both suffered from new assumptions about the nature and purposes of historical writing, which emerged among historians in the nineteenth century and which, if used as the main criteria for judging their worth, lead one to ignore the reasons why so many earlier readers had enjoyed reading them. In the case of Scott, and to some extent Bunyan, small groups of self-appointed 'custodians of patrimony' among critics and authors of later generations helped to ensure the marginalisation of their famous predecessors in ways best seen in the context of Bourdieusian power struggles within literary production than as mere shifts in literary taste (Rigney, 2012, pp. 10, 208, 214; Bourdieu, 1992, *passim*).

THE DECLINE OF CLASSICS

Some reasons are common to those four texts (Cicero, Plutarch, Boethius, and Gibbon), which emerge from or relate to the classical world and concern the status of classical languages and the Greco-Roman legacy. The fact that Latin ceased to be a living language in the eighteenth century – no longer spoken and, by the end of the century, only used as a written language for classical subjects – did not at first diminish interest in the ancient world, as the frequency of reference to it by French revolutionaries has indicated. Plutarch had always been mostly read in the vernacular and reached the peak of his influence in that century. But the shift to the vernacular, together with the increase in literacy, the increased availability of books with a contemporary focus, and the growth of interest in the non-classical past, slowly pushed the classical world away from the centre and towards the margins of national culture.

It was a long process – education in the Classics was in some ways stronger than ever in the nineteenth century, at least in Britain in the preparatory and public schools and the ancient universities (especially Oxford) – but the eventual reorientation in cultural focus that it brought about was so profound that, in the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot could talk about the move away from the Classics, at least in terms of its impact on the English language and English literature, as 'the transition from an old language to a new one' (Eliot, 1953, p. 229). The marked decline of general interest in *On Duties* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* was obviously in part a result of this, as was the more gradual waning of Plutarch's star. Voltaire's view that the rise and fall of the Roman Empire was the most important subject in the annals of humanity also began to seem out of focus to people, preoccupied by the rapid economic, social, and political changes of their own time, whose centre of attention was no longer the classical world (Womersley, 1988, p. 10). Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* no longer therefore had the same sense of familiarity and relevance as it would have had to someone much of whose education had been centred on the achievements of Rome. By the early twenty-first century, the marginalisation of classical languages, literature, and history in British education, as outlined in Chapter 1, had finally run its course to such an extent that the rare references to the ancient world in British public life were almost entirely confined to one classically educated individual

Member of Parliament, Boris Johnson, who in 2019–2022 also held the post of Prime Minister.[43]

THE COLLAPSE OF 'HIGH CULTURE'

More fundamental as a reason for the diminished status of these texts and their authors, and one that applies to all of them, is that we have moved from a society in which, among the 'educated class', there was a shared range of cultural reference that enabled one to assume that one's understanding of a large number of cultural 'facts' would be roughly the same as that of one's interlocutors, to one that is now very much more heterogeneous. I was first struck by this back in the 1970s when dipping into American annotated versions of contemporary classics for 'literature students and the general reader', which felt the need to explain what *Don Quixote* and *Les Misérables* were and gloss Virgil as 'the Latin poet (70–19 BC)' (Nabokov, 1971, pp. 336, 342).

We have also moved away from a society with an educated class associated with the fostering of a 'high culture', and permeated by the Aristotelian idea that the superior life is the life of thought, to one that Mario Vargas Llosa has described as a 'civilisation of spectacle', in which cultural objects are assumed to be ephemeral (*como el popcorn*), exist solely for purposes of entertainment and are evaluated in terms of their financial success, and in which the old notion of cultural hierarchies has largely been lost (Vargas Llosa, 2012, pp. 31–36, 44, 47, 51, 59).

[43] Boris Johnson, Foreign Secretary 2016–2018, Prime Minister 2019–2022. One of his earlier predecessors as Foreign Secretary in 1850, Lord Palmerston, in a debate in the House of Lords about the protection of British citizens abroad, made an oblique reference to Cicero, which his audience would have understood when saying that 'as the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say *Civis Romanus sum*; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England, will protect him against injustice and wrong'. The phrase *Civis Romanus sum* (I am a Roman citizen) was a rhetorical climax in one of Cicero's prosecuting counsel speeches (*In Verrem*) that helped to establish his political career. It is highly doubtful if the Latin phrase would be understood by a majority of contemporary members of parliament, let alone the implied Ciceronian reference, or that Palmerston's strong sense of the continued relevance of Roman times to Victorian England would be received today as anything other than eccentric.

In this new world, the young village schoolmaster of Chekhov's story *The Teacher of Literature* fretting about being outed by the founder of the local musical and dramatic society as someone who had not yet got round to reading Lessing is no longer conceivable, perhaps fortunately so (Chekhov, 1949). One might still be expected to have heard of Cicero, but there is no longer any general expectation, outside the narrowest of academic circles, that one might have read any of his works (or indeed read *The Iliad, The Aeneid, Jane Eyre, Hamlet, Northanger Abbey,* and the Authorised Version of *The Bible*) or that one's reading might be expected to move beyond magazines, blogs, and the latest bestsellers.

There are many explanations for this state of affairs. The economic, social, and political changes of the twentieth century especially the rise of the working class, have led to a democratisation of society. However, they have also produced a new elite, which, while continuing to try to keep the masses in their place now feels the need, for political reasons, to proclaim its allegiance to what it assumes, often wrongly and patronisingly, are their tastes and values. Contemporary politicians are often keen to tell us which football club they support or the pop music they listen to rather than their favourite authors, and, even if they did, they would be highly unlikely, in contrast to an earlier generation, to name Gibbon (Churchill), Trollope (Macmillan), Chateaubriand (de Gaulle), or Voltaire (Mitterrand). Most Western societies have also become ethnically and culturally more diverse as a result of immigration arising from demographic changes in the West and in other parts of the world, improved communications, and the never-ending pressure from our capitalist economies for economic growth. This, reinforced by a whole range of political and philosophical currents of thought (Marxism, with its assumption that the ideal society was one without history, postmodernism, and the waning of religious belief), has led to a prevailing naive relativism, which denies that some cultures might be superior to others and eschews judgements of value with regard to works of art. Most fundamentally, this cultural relativism has led to what George Steiner has called a 'penitential masochism' in which traditional hierarchies – between Western civilisation and the rest, between the educated and the uneducated, between the sexes, between upper and lower classes, between age and youth – have not just been cast aside but reversed (Steiner, 1971, pp. 53–54, 65; Vargas Llosa, 2012, pp. 66–68; Kimball, 2012, p. 5). It is a situation that renders quite untenable any notion that there might be some kind of literary canon, however porous and open to change over time, especially one largely composed of what many people in a largely

left-leaning academia have barbarously dismissed as Dead White European Males (DWEMS). In the case of this book's seven DWEMS, their texts are, of course, markedly less accessible to readers than what Vargas Llosa calls *literatura light,* mass market texts designed to give readers the comfortable illusion of being educated, revolutionary, modern, and in the vanguard, with the minimum of intellectual effort (Vargas Llosa, 2012, p. 37).

The weakening of the idea of a canon, negative though some of its consequences have been, is not, however, wholly a matter of loss. The distinction between the small elite group of 'readers' and 'people who read', which Frank Furedi, in his book *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter,* associates with the 'culture of great reading' among literary critics like Samuel Johnson, Virginia Woolf, and Harold Bloom, could easily become socially exclusionary. As Bourdieu put it (metaphorically, one assumes), 'aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent' (Furedi, 2015, pp. 156–159).

In *Power of Reading,* Furedi sees the decline in the centrality of literate culture in the second half of the twentieth century, even more profoundly, as a result of the West's disillusionment and lack of confidence in its own civilisation, as manifested in its fascination with pre-literate cultures, its reaction against rationality and the Enlightenment, its distrust of industrial society and the achievements of modernity, and its preoccupation with the visual and the aural as richer means of communication. Some of the blame he also places on what Marshall McLuhan called 'Gutenberg Man', prey to the supposed individualising and alienating effects of post-Gutenberg 'print culture' (Furedi, 2015, 186–187, 214).

More simply, less controversially, and maybe most plausibly, rapid demographic growth and expanding levels of literacy within Western societies have meant that there are now far more active contemporary and recent authors than there used to be, on top of all the inherited canonical ones. Thus, there are far more books being published and in circulation in bookshops (and online) than at any previous time. Add to this, the enormous expansion of higher education, the rediscovery of many past works, which had never made it into the canon (for example, works by women), the huge investment into scholarship in relation to these works and into new areas for historical study (despite all the current threats to the position of the humanities in the academy), and the diversity of university curricula, and it is not surprising if any work, unless it is by Shakespeare, ends up giving the impression that it has less of a spotlight on it and therefore less of a place in a country's cultural life than it had, say, in the sixteenth century, the eighteenth, or even the nineteenth.

THE 'READING REVOLUTION'

This huge expansion in the number of books available began with the introduction of printing but accelerated further in the eighteenth century with what Abigail Williams, in reference to England, has called a 'reading revolution. As a result of a huge increase in publications (c. 1,800 titles annually in 1700 compared with c. 6,000 in 1800), people moved from the intensive, often oral, reading of a few works to the extensive, often silent, reading of a wide range of works, more of which were now non-religious. It is a process that took a further step forward in the early nineteenth century when the advent of steam-powered printing allowed for the first time the mass production of affordable literature and its circulation to even wider segments of society (Williams, 2017, pp. 6, 95, 98, 239). Although this was a market in which rediscovered works such as *Le Morte Darthur* stood a better chance of winning readers – as the cheap 1816 editions of the work showed – it was also one in which both new and old books were more easily ignored and in which the idea of there being books that 'everyone' ought to have read became increasingly untenable. The very occasional work 'probably known to everyone in the country', such as Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man,* could still emerge, but only because before the twentieth century, the country's Christian identity, and, thus, its relative homogeneity, remained as yet largely unassailed (Williams, 2017, p. 245). Increased cultural diversity and the decline in church-going since the twentieth century have made this impossible.

Building on the 'reading revolution' of the eighteenth century and the growth of book and newspaper production in the nineteenth century, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have added further cultural and leisure opportunities available to people through films, popular music, radio, television, and, more recently, a wide range of new digital media. All this has cancelled out the opportunity that a more leisured society – less time spent working, more labour-saving devices, smaller families, more spare cash, easier access to books both physically and electronically – might have provided for a new 'reading revolution' in which more books, both old classics and new works, were being read.

Pew Research Center surveys of reading habits in the US in recent years suggest that the median number of books read per year is four, with women reading slightly more than men. An NOP survey a few years previously suggested that the UK and US were quite close in the amount of time spent reading

and towards the bottom of a table, which has India and Thailand at the top with nearly twice the amount. The amount of time Americans spend reading has gone down very considerably since a Gallup poll of 1978, and over the last ten years, there has been a gradual shift to the use of e-books alongside physical ones (Faverio & Perrin, 2022; Whittington, 2016; Weissmann, 2014; Wicen, 2022). But these are mostly crude data. College graduates and people in top jobs, and educated women, in particular, read more, but to what extent they read more than their counterparts a hundred years ago is not clear. Many of the voracious readers of the past that we know about, both men and women, compensated for larger families and lack of labour-saving devices by having servants to look after their children and attend to their every need and by not having full-time jobs. That kind of leisure among the highly educated is rare today outside the super-rich and the retired, and many professional people, even if well paid, work longer hours than their counterparts would have done a hundred years ago. So, it is not surprising that there is a dwindling number of people willing to embark on reading a lengthy work like *Le Morte Darthur,* especially (as it should be read) with the language unamended, or to do justice to *The Pilgrim's Progress, Decline and Fall,* and *Waverley* with their prefaces, footnotes, and biblical references, all of which have been included because the author takes it for granted that one is a serious reader, keen to have supplementary information and to think carefully about what one is reading. All these texts were written in a world in which the fastest pace was that of a swift horse or stage coach; the sounds were of the natural world, manual labour, and the human voice; there were far fewer people, much more space, and vast acres of silence. The pace of these texts reflects the greater sense of aural and visual spaciousness of the world in which they were written, which is one reason it is still good to make the effort to read them.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A 'NEW MAN': RELEVANCE AS AN AIM IN WESTERN EDUCATION

The survival of these and other formerly canonical texts has not been helped by developments in Western education in the second half of the century. Although it is difficult to generalise over a number of countries and a long period of time, it would not be inaccurate to say that the long-term trend in both school and university education has been consistently in the direction of a greater emphasis on its utilitarian purposes. This has coincided with the

growth in the power of the state in all Western societies and an era of ever more intrusive regulation not just of state schools but of every aspect of the education system. The Christian educator's focus on the development of virtues, character, and dogma and the humanist's concern for a liberal education, which consists, in Michael Oakeshott's words, of an apprenticeship in the main 'explanatory languages of human understanding' – historical, philosophical (including ethical), scientific, and poetic – have increasingly come to be replaced by an emphasis on education as a means to enhance a country's GDP and economic competitiveness and as a process that needs to be directly 'relevant' at all times to the here and now (Tate, 2017, pp. 133–134). In England, the fact that the humanities and modern foreign languages are not compulsory in its national curriculum after the age of fourteen and that the strapline for the 2016 white paper on the future of universities was 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' are only two of many indications one might give of this trend. In France, the philosopher of education Laurent Fedi has similarly summed up the dominant view about the aim of education in that country as the construction of 'a new man' (*un nouveau homme*) with the skills and mindset to take his place in a flexible, nomadic global marketplace rather than the development of individuals able to form their own opinions (Fedi, 2011, pp. 133, 191–209). In this atmosphere, the notion of education as the transmission of a culture and, in the case of such subjects as history and literature, the passing on of a national story and a canon of influential works, easily comes to be seen either of secondary importance or, at worst, as reactionary impulses that need to be combated. Sometimes, it is governments who are steering in this direction; sometimes, it is the generally left-leaning educators themselves, influenced as many of them have been by progressive theorists of education like Rousseau and Dewey sceptical of the idea of cultural transmission; sometimes, it is the two in unholy liaison.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY, THE PAST IS 'DEAD AND SILENT'

But the most important obstacle to the continuing reception of the seven texts we have been examining is the sense that has emerged in the modern world that the past has nothing to teach us. This is partly the result of the active hostility to book culture, which George Steiner has identified, arising as it sometimes does from the Romantic idea of personal experience

as superior to accumulated wisdom, nostalgia for a simpler way of life, or contempt for high culture, which does not put shoes on people's feet or food in their stomachs (Steiner, 2007, pp. 24–30). Yet it is even more fundamental than that. Contempt for the past is an inbuilt feature of modernity, its preoccupation with change and the future, its determination to be new and different, its deep intolerance (in President Obama's revealing words) of those who stand 'against the tide of history'. It is an attitude enhanced by the pressure for novelty within contemporary capitalism, without which the whole economic system in which we are enmeshed would not keep moving. In this situation, as Francis O'Gorman has explained in *Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia,* men and women are 'invited … to believe that things over or old (are) unimportant, retrogressive, and unsellable' (O'Gorman, 2017, pp. 46). The last half-century, with its identity politics and the increasing dominance of a left liberal *pensée unique,* has further intensified this attitude towards the past as a result of the West's self-flagellation over its historical record in relation to its former colonial subjects, women, sexual minorities, and other minority groups. Although this has helpfully revised the historical record, it has left us with an image of the past as the site of oppression, discrimination, and trauma and encouraged the idea that one studies or teaches about the past mainly to wag one's finger at it for the disgraceful ways in which it failed to conform to current liberal values. As a result, in O'Gorman's words, 'the mainstream, the canonical, the enduringly valued, have been re-envisaged as old-fashioned, oppressive, or merely dull' (O'Gorman, 2017, pp. 131, 133, 135).

This sense of the redundancy of the past has been analysed by a group of French academics, experts on what is happening in France's educational institutions, with a view to identifying what they call the 'civilisational conditions' that are making the educational task of transmission in these institutions such a difficult one. There is a pervasive sense in these institutions, they argue, that, for the first time in history, the past is 'dead and silent' and no longer a source of guidance to people in the present, that what matters is the future, not the past, that the knowledge one gains from study and reading should be of immediate use, and that, if it does not directly benefit the student or reader, it is not worth bothering with. All this renders difficult and at times impossible the task of passing on the heritage (*patrimoine*) of a country and a civilisation which, though under siege as elsewhere in the West, still remains a core objective of the French educational system (Blais et al., 2008, pp. 8, 60, 73, 75, 109–110, 160).

It is, of course, not surprising that the past has come to seem 'dead and silent' given that the worlds in which our seven authors lived, and the images of these worlds that their texts convey, are much further removed from the world today – not least in the sheer physical conditions of life, with our cars, aeroplanes, drones, smartphones, computers, and internet, but also in our most basic assumptions about our existence – than any of our authors were from each other despite the many centuries and millennia that separated them. That this ought not to be a barrier, even though for many it is one, and that it ought indeed to be an incentive to rediscover these texts is something I will argue in the final chapter.

In Proust's brilliant 1905 essay *Sur la lecture* (*On Reading*), written as an introduction to his translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies,* France's greatest twentieth-century author takes it for granted that people with fine minds will always be drawn to classic texts from other eras because of how they bring back to life, as in a mirror, forms of language and ways of being that are no more and, in doing so, move us deeply. It is the most innovative artists in the present who feel this, he argues, and who draw their strength from this source. 'It is the very syntax in use in seventeenth-century France – and through this the customs and a manner of thought that have disappeared – which we enjoy finding in the verse of Racine', he writes. As an argument about the value of classic texts, it is part of the essay's wider theme that one should expose oneself to situations profoundly different from one's own in which one's imagination can 'exult in feeling immersed into the very heart of something other than itself' (Proust, 1997, pp. 19–20, 50–51). Even if one can no longer assume that texts like *Le Morte Darthur* and *The Pilgrim's Progress,* steeped as they are in the language and atmosphere of their times, will easily appeal in this way, these are feelings capable of being re-evoked.[44]

[44] The depressing findings of Blais, Gauchet, and Ottavi about the death of the past in French schools have been slightly offset, at least for me, by reading about the extraordinary work of the teacher and novelist Cécile Ladjali, whose projects with a baccalaureate class in a depressed Parisian lycée populated by large numbers of students of African, North African, and Asian heritage involved exposure to demanding texts in different languages relating to myths such as the Fall and the Tower of Babel, including, as well as the Bible, readings from Milton, Blake, Dante, Virgil, Ovid, Baudelaire, Balzac, Valéry, and Céline. 'I like pupils to be intimidated by texts', she says, 'and my role is to ensure that they soon feel that the strangeness of these texts is something welcoming, not off-putting'. The project on the Fall led to the writing of a collection of sixty sonnets, which were published, with a preface by George Steiner, and broadcast by the students on French radio (Steiner & Ladjali, 2003).

THE 'MELANCHOLY, LONG, WITHDRAWING ROAR' OF THE 'SEA OF FAITH'

Finally, an obstacle to contemporary reception in the case of Malory and Bunyan is the very Christian nature of their works, especially of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I exclude *The Consolation of Philosophy* here because, though written by someone all the evidence about whom convinces one that he must have been a Christian, it is not an explicitly Christian work. From the seventeenth century onwards – long before Matthew Arnold's mid-nineteenth century 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of 'the Sea of Faith' – there were signs in England that Christianity was heading for a period of decline, at least in terms of the intensity and certainty of people's beliefs. Despite churches continuing to be at the centre of the nation's life and despite intermittent religious revivals, a series of developments – the scientific revolution, Enlightenment, Darwinism, rapid urbanisation, historical-critical approaches to biblical scholarship – were all found to be pushing in the same direction. It was a direction that made Bunyan's passionate certainty about God's purposes for the world and the predestined salvation or damnation of each of us increasingly difficult for many people to accept. As J. A. Froude put it, Bunyan's Christianity was 'a fire from heaven shining like a sun in a dark world' but, in a metaphor that sums up the disenchantment with the world which came with modernity, a 'fire (that) has gone out' (Froude, 1888, p. 56). Bunyan shared with Malory this sense that there was another spiritual world beyond or hidden within this one and that connections between the two were possible. For many later readers, this was an increasingly alien notion and added a further sense of distance between them and these two texts.

The waning of Christianity is also one reason why texts with an explicitly moral purpose might also jar with some modern readers. In a post-Christian world in which the ten commandments, four cardinal virtues, and three theological virtues no longer guide most people's moral self-examination, and non-judgementalism is the dominant ethical position, books that explicitly set out to encourage one to examine and criticise one's own behaviour and to become a better (and not just fitter, healthier, more confident, and more successful) person may come as a surprise. *On Duties* has as its central theme the distinction between doing what is expedient and in one's own interest and doing what is ethical, pushing us towards the primacy of the latter. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is in part a *protreptic,* a work designed to encourage

readers to change their way of life. *The Pilgrim's Progress* tells readers what it is to live the kind of holy life that will convince them that they are in receipt of Christ's grace. Malory is in no doubt where he stands on the principles of chivalry, even if torn at times on their application to particular cases. Plutarch sees history as a genre with a moral purpose, helping readers to improve their own character through studying past examples of virtue and vice, a view which Gibbon had far from abandoned a millennium and a half later. In an era when books about boosting self-esteem are more common than ones urging self-criticism, all this risks coming across as intrusive.

DOES IT MATTER THAT THESE TEXTS ARE NEGLECTED OR FORGOTTEN?

The final chapter sums up the reasons why these seven texts are still worth reading and suggests some ways of doing so. But would it matter if these texts were to sink further into oblivion? What would be lost if they were to do so?

Despite writing this book to help keep these particular seven texts alive, the frank answer has to be 'not a great deal in the wider scheme of things'. What is arguably important for Europe is not to lose its sense of its origins, not to forget its Hebraic, Greek, Roman, and Christian roots (in all their diversity), to see itself and its future, however much this might change, as in some sense a continuation of this past, in other words, not to lose either this overall sense of identity or the different national and cultural identities that have grown up inside it. But this does not have to be done by reading the seven texts we have been discussing in this book. Such is the abundance of the European literary heritage that it could also be done through reading ethical, philosophical, and historical texts by other Greek and Latin authors (Thucydides, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, for example), by reading Chaucer rather than Malory, Pascal's *Pensées* or Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* rather than Bunyan, David Hume's *History of England* as an example of eighteenth-century historiography instead of *Decline and Fall,* and Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clevès* rather than Scott's *Waverley.* Something would be lost in all of these substitutions, but something would also be gained. If forced to choose, I might even prefer Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* – by no means a neglected or forgotten work – to *On Duties.* I also know from past experience that I am more likely to return frequently to Donne's *Devotions* than to *The Pilgrim's Progress,* though working on it for this book has given me a new sense

of the latter's greatness. What one would not want to lose in any alternative set of seven inter-connected texts would be that sense of the development of Europe from its Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian origins, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, into the kind of modernity that began to emerge in the seventeenth century.

Also, as each new century appears and each new millennium opens, large numbers of books get added to the lists of those worthy to survive, with the effect that, even within one literary culture such as that of England, it becomes impossible to read most of them. Too much emphasis on an earlier canon might thus lead one to neglect newer works. It might also have the effect that David Rieff has analysed in relation to historical narratives of fixing the collective memory of a society in ways harmful to its current well-being, though this seems unlikely in the case of the seven texts under consideration given their particular openness to a wide range of interpretations (Rieff, 2016). Over-preoccupation with the present and recent past, however, can lead one to forget that there are at least two and a half millennia of writing behind one that should not be lost sight of. In the much more globally inter-connected world of the early twenty-first century (Europe has always been well connected in ways that have nothing to do with the European Union), one can be similarly tempted into exploring what is on offer from other parts of the world – and there is a huge amount of excellent work, both recent and from past periods – thus adding to the neglect of the ever-accumulating inheritance closer to home.

The choice is like the one between intensive and extensive reading. Intensive reading allows one to become deeply familiar with individual works, which are read and re-read and with a particular literary heritage, or an element of that heritage, thus helping to ensure the continuation of that heritage and its distinctive identity. I have been struck in the reading I have done for this book by how some of the best and most insightful academic writers on the seven authors have spent a large part of their careers working on the same author or, in the case of *Le Morte Darthur* and the *Decline and Fall,* the same text, often returning to and revising their earlier thoughts in light of new readings and new research.

Extensive reading, by contrast, allows one to dot all over the place and make connections that throw up new perceptions that one might not otherwise have had. The only non-European work I found time to read during my work on this book was the *Analects* of Confucius, which I had been planning to read for years. Its guidance to a Chinese elite on ethics and behaviour

struck me as having remarkable parallels with both *On Duties* and *Parallel Lives.* It drew my attention to the existence of perennial issues across very different civilisations and time periods. Extensive reading, however, can be superficial, missing opportunities to exploit the full potential of works and failing to see them in the context of the distinctive cultures and literary traditions from which they emerge. As Seneca put it:

> Be careful, however, lest this reading of many authors and all sorts of books may mean a measure of instability and vagabondage: the works of genius over which you linger and on which you feed must lie within fixed limits if you want to draw from them something which will make a genuine lodgement in your spirit. To be everywhere is to be nowhere. (Seneca, 1932, pp. 2–3)

1,900 years later, Ezra Pound was similarly urging readers 'to read fewer (books) with greater result' (Pound, 1931, p. 8).

Reading that is highly individualised may also reduce the potential of books to help shape a community's identity. The conversation one will be able to have with one's fellow countrymen and women about one's country's place in the world will be very different if one cannot assume that the education received and the reading done by others has also given them knowledge of its history and culture. It is for this reason that education systems concerned with communal cohesion restrict choice and prescribe the historical topics and the types of canonical works to be studied.

So it would not be a disaster if these seven texts faded still further from the general memory, as long as their 'archival memory' is carefully preserved and as long as alternative works from across the different phases of Western civilisation remain part of the reading of large numbers of educated people.[45] This does not mean that there are not still very good reasons for reading them and for ensuring that they are better known. That will be the theme of the concluding chapter.

[45] The 'archival memory' of these seven texts and their reception is generally in good hands, though the decline of the humanities in Western higher education in the early twenty-first century, and the prevalence of highly utilitarian conceptions of the university, above all in the eyes of state authorities, is a potential threat to both teaching and research in the area of literary, historical, and philosophical studies.

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CONCLUSION: REDISCOVERING THE VIRTUES OF READING

In *The Power of Reading,* Frank Furedi (2015) talks about the 'unique acclamation of the written word' in Western civilisation and laments the way in which the former centrality of reading has been displaced by a utilitarian emphasis on functional literacy. It is an emphasis he traces back to the nineteenth century but which he sees as increasingly dominant from the 1960s. Its effects, he argues, are to transform schools into mere 'sites for skills training' and reading into 'a skill on a par with managing information'. In the face of this challenge, 'rediscovering the virtues of reading' constitutes one of the most significant cultural objectives of modern times (pp. 186–187, 213–214).

The popularity, extensive use over time, and occasional reverence for the seven texts with which this book has been concerned are testimony to the traditional centrality of reading in Western civilisation. But the purposes that reading has served have varied greatly and, as a consequence, so has the place of reading in individual people's lives and in wider communities.

TACKLING 'BIG ISSUES' AS A SINE QUA NON OF GREAT BOOKS

Central to the Judaeo-Christian traditions within Western civilisation has been the importance of reading as a means to accessing the Truths of our existence, above all through the reading of the Bible and other sacred texts. Reading the Bible became a particularly important part of people's lives in Protestant societies following the Reformation. For John Bunyan learning how to 'read between the lines', moving from the literal meaning of the biblical text to its deeper meanings, was central to his search for salvation. It was also central to *The Pilgrim's Progress* and to what its author expected of its readers. Although much less of a Christian work, and indeed in most ways a non-Christian work, *The Consolation of Philosophy* also offers access to the deepest truths: about free will, Providence, Fate, the relationship between

goodness and happiness, and the nature of God's perfection. Contemporary readers may no longer share the same sense that there are objective truths about the meaning of existence to be discovered through reading, but a continuing attraction of these two texts for some readers is the way in which they tackle 'big issues' about how to live one's life and come to terms with one's death. The critic F. R. Leavis remarked that grappling with 'the meaning of life' was a *sine qua non* of great art and, despite his distaste for aspects of Bunyan's theology, saw this as a reason for the greatness of *The Pilgrim's Progress.*[46]

The other five works can also be said to do this, though in different ways. *On Duties* gives advice on how to cope in the imperfect and dangerous world of late Republican Rome, advice that can equally apply to a Western world sensing its own decline. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* present us with all the vicissitudes which might conceivably confront human beings and show readers the different ways in which, in such a world, we might live well and die well but also end up doing the opposite. *Le Morte Darthur* is at least in part a tragedy, at times of almost Sophoclean intensity, confronting readers with situations of high drama and emotion in which brothers kill each other, fathers find themselves fighting with sons, and impossible choices have to be made. Of all the seven texts, this is probably the one that best meets Kafka's criteria for books worth reading: ones that 'bite and sting us' or, like an axe, break 'the frozen sea within us' (Manguel, 1996, p. 93). It is difficult to disagree with Carlyle that Scott is not quite within this category, 'not of the sublime sort' and without any 'divine awakening voice'; yet even *Waverley,* despite its limp main character, compels readers to confront difficult issues such as the extinction of pre-modern cultures, the suffering this causes, the plight of individuals caught up in it, and the conflicting feelings it can arouse (Carlyle, 1899, pp. 41, 76).

It has been said of one of our authors – Scott – that his works no longer speak to us (Rigney, 2012, p. 214). This may well be the case, and in examining the waning influence of our seven texts, some of the reasons for this have been discussed. The fault, however, may lie as much with the reader as the writer. Because written in different social and cultural worlds, the relevance and value of a text may only emerge as a result of the contemporary reader adopting a more active role, stripping away alien superficialities of voice to reveal the perennial messages that lie beneath.

[46] See p. 202.

READING BOOKS FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Even more central to all seven texts is the idea of reading as an exercise in self-awareness, moral self-enquiry, and moral self-improvement. What this means has varied over time. Where there was clarity about the kind of moral life that was being aimed at, books were more likely to be seen as having the function of instructing and persuading readers how to live their lives. *On Duties* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* fit into this category, though in neither case is there anything crude about the ethical messages they convey. Reading in this sense was instrumental in that it had a particular purpose and was useful.

This approach to reading has never died out and, according to Furedi, is much more central to reading today given the stress on functional literacy. However, from the Renaissance onwards, and especially from the eighteenth century, it came to be supplemented by the idea that reading could be more about self-discovery, richly rewarding spiritually, and a source of personal fulfilment, more than just a means of ensuring compliance with external ethical standards. The 'love of reading' associated with this led to accusations of escapism and, in the eighteenth century, to criticisms both of the 'excessive' number of books that people were reading and of what was seen as a frivolous vogue for 'reading for its own sake' (Williams, 2017, p. 278; Furedi, 2015, pp. 8–9, 13).

Mainstream assumptions about reading continued to stress active reflection and the exercise of judgement not just about the quality of what one was reading but also about oneself as reader and the implications of one's reading for one's own view of the world and how well one was living one's own life. Goethe identified three kinds of reader: one who enjoys without judgement; one who judges without enjoyment; and one who judges while enjoying and enjoys while judging (Furedi, 2015, pp. 162–163). It is this third kind of reader – commended by Dryden when writing about the balance between entertainment and instruction in Plutarch's 'most pleasant School of Wisdom' – that all seven texts encourage, sometimes explicitly but mostly implicitly, through the way they juxtapose different parts of their material.[47]

[47] See p. 59.

CONTINUITIES IN THE MORAL MESSAGE

Despite the eighteen centuries which separate the earliest and latest of the seven texts, the texts highlighted in this book show a striking commonality in the moral messages they are conveying to the reader. This commonality is not that of particular moral judgements in relation to specific types of situations but of fundamental ethical considerations one should take into account in making these moral judgements. Cicero in *On Duties* asserts the superiority of the good over the useful and the expedient, while insinuating that judgements in difficult real world situations cannot be made on quite such a simple basis. Machiavelli sensed this tension between idealism and realism in the sixteenth century, and Bentham turned it into a fully-fledged theory of utilitarian consequentialism three hundred years later. It is a thread in both philosophical and everyday ethical thinking that has persisted across two millennia.

On Duties also holds up standards of fitting conduct – consistency, self-control, dignified behaviour – which while set in the context of aristocratic young Roman men in the first century BC, are not far removed from the integrity and moderation of Plutarchan heroes such as Phocion and Epaminondas; from the Boethius character's increasingly controlled and stoical response to his imprisonment in *The Consolation of Philosophy*; from Sir Gareth of Orkney's superhuman restraint in *Le Morte Darthur* when repeatedly mocked by an aristocratic young lady he had set out to help; from the patient endurance of suffering in *The Pilgrim's Progress*; or from Edward's *bildungsroman,* moving from naivety to a deeper understanding of his responsibilities in *Waverley.* My old tutor, the medieval historian Maurice Keen, in his book *Chivalry,* saw the virtues of loyalty, duty, service, and generosity represented in some of these works as helping to shape the self-conception and behaviour of the aristocracies which ruled Europe until recent times; these left an imprint that is still traceable within contemporary society despite all the radical social changes that have since taken place. He traced the origins of these attitudes and values in the chivalry of the knightly class in the Middle Ages (exemplified, as we have seen, in *Le Morte Darthur*), but they go back much farther as our small sample of Greco-Roman texts has shown (Keen, 1984, p. 253).

This shared understanding of what it is to lead a good and honourable life, based on attitudes and beliefs derived from Greece, Rome, and Israel, which

have been absorbed and transformed by Christianity, is an important part of what I assume writers like Frank Furedi mean when they talk about 'Western' civilisation without defining it. In our sample of seven texts, despite their many differences of tone and emphasis, it is a shared understanding which runs as a clear thread across the 1,800 years from Cicero to Scott, disseminated as it has been *en route* to some of the many other texts that each of our texts influenced in its turn.

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

Le Morte Darthur has been seen as a book which 'shows shifting and competing ways of imagining communities', in which changing conceptions of Englishness, Britishness, and Frenchness are revealed (Hodges, 2010, pp. 566–569). It was written at a time when English kings were struggling to assert their authority not just vis-à-vis other parts of the British Isles but also over peripheral parts of England and, because it was a period of intermittent civil war, within England's heartland itself. England had also just lost most of its territories in France but the culture of its ruling class was so intertwined with that of France after four centuries of the closest association that the implications of this separation were only beginning to have their impact on questions of identity, language, and culture. England's membership of the universal Church, its relations with the Papacy, and the threat to Christendom from the Islamic world following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 also raise their heads in the book. None of these matters and their implications for identity are explicitly addressed by Malory, the least self-conscious of our seven authors, but they are there in the text for attentive and reflective readers to explore and, if they wish, relate to other 'competing ways of imagining communities' in later times.

Multiple and potentially conflicting identities are also a central issue in the writings of both Plutarch and Scott. Exploring his Hellenic identity and his membership as a citizen of the Roman Empire, and the relationship between the two, were at the heart of Plutarch's project to write 'parallel lives' of famous Greeks and Romans. I have suggested earlier that his writings hint at ways in which these different identities might be reconciled and, in particular, how the traditions of Greek cities like Chaeronea might help Romanised Greeks maintain a distinctive Hellenic identity without the risks involved in challenging Roman power. All this is highly pertinent to contemporary

debates about the relationship between local, national, and global identities and about subsidiarity within federal and semi-federal entities, and can help the reader look at these debates from new angles. Scott's writings similarly have issues of identity at their heart, explicitly in *Waverley* in addressing Scotland's place as a separate nation within the United Kingdom of Great Britain. This was of huge concern to Scott as someone deeply conscious of Scotland's distinctive cultural identity while at the same time strongly supportive of the Union and a staunch friend of England. Scott's writings generally, and not just *Waverley,* because of their empathetic treatment of minorities and of those left behind by 'progress', were also in many cases received as making common cause with ethnic and cultural groups seeking their freedom from oppressive rulers. I first read *Waverley* following my arrival in Edinburgh in 1974 as an Englishman appointed to a lectureship in a history department three of whose members were staunch supporters of the Scottish National Party, one of them its education spokesman, and as an applicant who had been successful in competition with Scottish applicants for a post which involved teaching some Scottish history. I was left in no doubt that *Waverley* was dealing with issues that were far from dead.

In the case of Gibbon, issues of identity similarly emerge both from his personal circumstances and from the subject matter of a historical work that charts the decline of the Roman imperial identity, its continuing legacy, and the new identities, often ambiguously related to it, which arose in its wake. As a francophone and francophile, exiled when young to Lausanne, 'a life citizen' of the 'great republic of Europe', yet an English gentleman proud of his ancestry, a captain of the Hampshire militia and an MP, a lapsed Catholic and a religious sceptic yet a defender of the establishment, Gibbon was very familiar with 'shifting and competing ways of imagining communities'. Like Plutarch and Scott, he too is an antidote to all the single-identity obsessives – ethnic, racial, religious, political – that many contemporary readers of these three authors have to confront in their daily and professional lives.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: POSTMODERNISM AVANT LA LETTRE

In commenting on most of these seven texts, I have frequently noted how the scholarly literature in recent decades has drawn attention to the polyphony of authorial voices within them – in the Bakhtinian sense of 'polyphony' as

the interweaving of different and sometimes conflicting perspectives. Where moral, philosophical, and historical issues are addressed in a text, authors are often found to have treated them ambiguously or to have put forward alternative approaches to them, leaving readers to make up their own minds, and to have done so in ways that critics in earlier generations had failed to appreciate fully. One gets a sense from some scholarly critics that complexity, indeterminacy, diversity, and irony are all welcome, while simplicity and certainty are not. As a result, one feels at times that one might be learning disproportionately more about the critics than one is about the texts. If one has a perspectival view of truth and a sense of the relativism of all values, or an instinctive wish to puncture all that is normative, and one has been reading Bourdieu, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, Eagleton, and Žižek, it is not surprising that one approaches these texts in that way and that one finds what one has been hoping to find. The drumbeat of contemporary literary theory, and its associated love of opacity, is completely and mercifully absent, in my experience, from the scholarly communities that have grown up around Cicero, Plutarch, and Boethius, still a distant echo among commentators on Malory, beginning to creep into books and articles relating to Bunyan and Gibbon, but building rapidly to a crescendo with Scott. In the course of my reading, I have developed a way of working out a book's or article's Opacity Index, which has helped me to decide whether to persevere with other writings by a particular scholarly author.[48]

Whatever their occasional excesses – and I have cited a few in the course of the book – contemporary scholarly communities, however, have largely got it right. These seven texts, in their very different ways, are all polyphonic in the sense I have defined, many leave readers to make up their own minds or even invite them to do so, some draw attention to the presence of the author behind the text or to the text's fictionality, a number use irony to suggest different messages,, and all address serious and complex issues in ways that make unreflective and highly simplistic responses inappropriate. Cicero hovers

[48] (1) Add the number of references to Bourdieu, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, Eagleton, and Žižek in the book or article. (2) Add the number of uses of the words 'proleptic', 'protreptic', 'diachronic', 'synchronic', 'instantiate', 'polyphonic', and 'quotidian'. (3) Add the number in 1 to the number in 2. (4) Note the number of pages in the text. (5) Divide the number in 4 by the number in 3. This, as a proportion, gives the Opacity Index. Example: If a 100-page book contains 10 references to these authors and 10 uses of those words, it has a 20% Opacity Index. An Index of over 100% is, of course, possible and known to exist.

on the borderline between moral absolutism and moral relativism, as does the modern world, making the case for both. This is why, over the centuries, both orthodox Christian apologists and advocates of utilitarian ethics have felt able to claim *On Duties* as their own. Similarly with Boethius, although I am sceptical of the idea that the figure of Philosophy is deliberately given weak arguments as a way of implicitly criticising the Platonic worldview, there is no doubt that the book leaves readers with issues about free will and predestination, which only they can resolve (and which they have done so in different ways). Plutarch's whole work is centred on presenting to readers a range of people about whose character and virtues and vices they are encouraged to sit in judgement, comparing one with another and teasing out the qualities that make them good or bad. Malory does something similar in relation to the tensions in Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere and Arthur, the way women are depicted in the book, and the conflicts at the heart of chivalry around honour and loyalty, though less obtrusively and in ways that, at times, seem to prefigure later literary forms in their focus on illustrating and exemplifying rather than openly discussing. Bunyan is much more at home than Malory with abstract nouns but is equally polyphonic – very much, one suspects, without being consciously aware of it – when addressing the same issues of free will and predestination raised by Boethius.

With Gibbon and Scott, one advances even further into the multiple perspectives characteristic of modernity. Gibbon's pervasive irony usually leaves little doubt as to what he himself believes but, nonetheless, pits different interpretations against each other and draws attention to the fact that historical accounts are authorial productions, not unqualified statements of the truth that one has no choice but to accept. He also puts before the reader the possibility that things might not be quite what they seem by frequently qualifying his main statements in his footnotes. In the second part of *Decline and Fall,* in particular, Gibbon's sense of the sheer contingency of the historical process, his inability to find a clear meta-narrative, and the growing relativism of his own value judgements point increasingly to a view of historical writing very different from that of his Greco-Roman predecessors, influenced by them though he continued to be. Scott, despite his image as a Tory 'arse-licker' in some radical literary circles, is the most polyphonic of them all. He allows us to develop multiple perspectives on an individual character, contrives to contrast characters with each other in a whole variety of subtle ways, presents us with a range of different views (for example, on the 1745 Jacobite rising), and exhibits wide sympathies for

the people who hold these views, rarely coming down unequivocally on one side or the other. Scott leaves us with the impression that there are different versions of the truth and does not hide that what we are reading is fiction, thus encouraging us to make up our own minds as readers about the situations, issues, and people with which we are presented. His novels are also replete with references to other texts in ways that can be highly allusive, encouraging readers to develop perspectives on the work, which can run contrapuntally with those deriving more directly from narrative and dialogue.

Heidegger talked about the West's 'ontological legacy of questioning', which can be traced back to the Greeks, was kept alive by the Romans, took a different form in the Hebrew scriptures, survived under Christianity, re-appeared with the Renaissance and (in a complex way) with the Reformation, and came to fruition in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It has led to a questioning of fundamentals unique among world cultures in its extent and impact. It is a legacy of questioning – of one-man rule (Cicero), the established socio-political order (Bunyan), the claims of the Christian Church (Gibbon) – to which some of these seven texts have contributed (Steiner, 2015, pp. 47, 63).

WHY AND HOW SHOULD WE READ?

> We read contemptuously, admiringly, negligently, angrily, passionately, enviously, longingly. We read in gusts of sudden pleasure, without knowing what brought the pleasure along … we read ignorantly. We read in slow, long motions, as if drifting in space, weightless. We read full of prejudice, malignantly. We read generously, making excuses for the text, filling gaps, mending faults. And sometimes, when the stars are kind, we read with an intake of breath, with a shudder … leaving us older and wiser.
>
> – MANGUEL (1996, p. 303)

There are many different ways of reading, as Alberto Manguel is suggesting, and of reading the seven texts with which this book has been concerned; these vary as much with the individual reader as they do with the book and, in some cases, as much within each individual reader as they do between one individual reader and another. As a young student, attending school and then university in Buenos Aires in the 1960s, Manguel for four years was a reader to the already blind Jorge Luis Borges and whose thoughts he is here

echoing. Borges, like Manguel, had a lot to say about books long after he had ceased to be able to see or read them himself. In a lecture on 'The Book' to students at Argentina's Belgrano University in 1978, he compared opening a book to the Heraclitean metaphor of never stepping in the same river twice:

> No one steps into the same river twice because the water is always changing, but the most terrible thing is that we are no less fluid than the river. Every time we read a book, the book has changed, the connotation of the words is not the same. (Borges, 1996, p. 171. Translation by the author)

The Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño similarly speculates repeatedly in his magnum opus *2666* about the interaction of reader and book and, in particular, on the impact of different ways of reading and of the different contexts in which reading takes place: the experience of reading at great speed, of reading with such slowness that 'each phrase, each word is a matter of supreme delicacy not just for one's brain but for one's whole body', of reading in prison, of reading while walking in a garden, of a blind man reading in braille for hours on end in a silent dark room (Bolaño, 2005, pp. 325–326, 351, 1056–1057).

The authors of our texts also had their thoughts about reading, its purposes, and how to do it most effectively, as well as implicitly conveying messages about the ways in which their works should be read through the literary forms they used. *On Duties, The Consolation of Philosophy, Parallel Lives,* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* all had explicitly moral purposes. In each case, the authors saw reading as a very serious matter as a result of which one had opportunities to reflect on oneself, acquire self-knowledge, and consider possibilities for self-improvement. Both *On Duties* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* are works designed to instruct, specifically, in the case of the former, to instruct the young. Plutarch was likewise explicit that the function of history was to show how famous people in the past exemplified different combinations of virtue and vice so that readers might learn about the nature of these qualities, apply them to themselves, and grow in self-knowledge and virtuous behaviour. This is why Montaigne rated Plutarch so highly as an author in what he described as 'that branch of learning which deals with knowing myself and which teaches me how to live and die well' and from which the reader learns 'how to control (his) humours and (his) qualities'. What he particularly liked about Plutarch was that he gives the reader space, is not hasty in his judgements, and 'leads' his readers rather than 'drives' them (Montaigne, 2003, pp. 459, 463–464). 1,650 years after Plutarch, Gibbon was

still conveying in *Decline and Fall,* though less explicitly, that the purpose of historical writing was instructive and that one of its effects should be to help one to live better in the present.

Our three early modern and modern authors, Bunyan, Gibbon, and Scott, also shared with their three Greco-Roman predecessors the sense that their writings were intended to be useful. Utility for Bunyan was helping his readers understand better why they had been placed in this world and how they might find evidence as to their fate in the next one. For Gibbon, it was learning about how the world had come to be as it is and about one's own place in time. For Scott, it was learning to reflect on the characters in his fiction and thus on oneself and, in the case of *Waverley* specifically, on the process of maturation as an impulsive young man moves from adolescence to manhood. All three assumed that reading was a serious matter, supplying their readers with frequent footnotes (Gibbon and Scott), lengthy historical prefaces (Scott), and copious references to check the text against the Bible (Bunyan), the effect of which was to slow one's reading and make it more reflective, encouraging the reader to stand back from the main text and see it in a different light. In *Waverley,* where one hears early on in the novel about the benefits and drawbacks of Edward Waverley's extensive but desultory reading as a youth, the message to readers could not be clearer: reading is an important part of one's life, early reading is particularly influential, how one reads has consequences for a person's 'character, happiness, and utility', concentration and perseverance while reading are crucial, discarding too lightly books one finds difficult or boring creates bad habits, reading should 'benefit the understanding' not just 'awaken the imagination', and the lack of properly planned and reflective reading in a young person leaves him justly considered 'ignorant, since he knew little of what adds dignity to man and qualifies him to support and adorn an elevated situation in society' (Scott, 2007, p. 15). One comes away from this either determined to take one's own reading more seriously or so disheartened one feels like giving up. Scott later clearly seems to have admitted that at times such counsels of perfection might be temporarily put aside, at least in terms of his own novels, where, if necessary, 'the laudable practice of skipping' might be resorted to in places (Alexander, 2017, p. 58).

The polyphonic nature of most of these seven texts also pushes one towards attentive reading. When one finds that in a *synkrisis* – a comparison of a pair of parallel lives – Plutarch judges a character more leniently than he has been judged in his *Life,* as in the case of Sulla, with a consequent impact on how

one perceives his twin, one is brought up short; if one is to move beyond mere puzzlement, and maybe irritation, it is necessary, in a phrase to which Hannah Arendt gave new significance, to 'stop and think' and, in this case, to reflect on the discrepancy, why it has suddenly appeared, and how one reacts to it (Arendt, 1961, p. 14). Similarly, in *Waverley,* although the novel guides us to the view that the defeat of the 1745 Jacobite rising was necessary for the sake of a mutually beneficial relationship between England and Scotland within the Union, and the only outcome that sane, rational people ought to support, one finishes the novel with positive images of a Highland way of life, now destroyed forever, still vividly present in one's mind. The juxtaposition of the two encourages us to 'stop and think' about the relationship between reason and feeling that got us into this situation.

It was this kind of reading that Nietzsche had in mind when, in his preface to *Daybreak,* he described his own type of art as one that 'teaches to read *well* … that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers' (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 5). For lifelong readers, who have left us their prescriptions for what reading should involve, this also points to re-reading. Borges, in his 1978 talk on 'The Book', not surprisingly after a lifetime of living among books and reading vast numbers of them, said that he believed re-reading was more important than reading and that this was now, by preference, what he tried to do (Borges, 1996, p. 170). Schopenhauer believed that only the best books deserved re-reading, but that one should focus on a limited number of these books and get to know them well. When re-reading a book, he thought, one benefits from reading its beginning in light of what one now knows about its end and from the freshness this gives to our new reading (Young, 2017, pp. 113–115). For Proust, re-reading books often told one more about the circumstances in which they were first read, the memory of which is stimulated by picking up the book again, than about the contents of the book itself (Proust, 1997, p. 26).

Re-reading, though, does not necessarily mean re-reading the whole. The advantage of a book already read is that it is easier to find one's way around it and to put any random passages one stumbles on in a wider context. In *Le Morte Darthur,* there are two passages to which I keep on returning: the moment when Lancelot, in the depths of despair and after a sleepless night, hears the dawn chorus and is 'somewhat comforted' and the scene towards the end of the book, where Arthur is borne away to Avalon in a barge, leaving the faithful Sir Bedevere weeping on the water's edge. Both are so charged

with emotion and meaning that they have the effect of removing me from my daily thoughts and giving me a profoundly melancholic, but at the same time deeply satisfying, sense of the contingency of my existence in this world. Similarly with *Decline and Fall,* ever since I first started reading it, I have had at the back of my mind the opening of the book (Chapter 1 of Book 1) in which Gibbon gives the reader an introductory overview of the state of the Roman Empire in the age of the Antonines. I can even quote bits of it from memory. This is partly because it is often cited. It is also because it is a splendid example – and the first one encounters on taking up the book – of Gibbon's beautifully measured style, an example in which the rhythm of the prose and the balance between its different clauses mirror the order, calm, and rationality of the Antonine world he evokes:

> In the second century of the Christian Era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. (Gibbon, 1994, p. 31)

More profoundly, this conjures up an image of a golden age of stability, calm, and quiet enjoyment, which stays in one's mind as a symbol both of what has been and is now irretrievably lost and of what still lingers in the imagination. In a book about the decline and fall of this empire – 'a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth' – this image of what has been lost (however inflated, and Gibbon himself hints at how it is inflated) also signals the momentousness of the historical changes under consideration. One gains a sense of one's place, as a small unimportant individual, in the much wider scheme of things, a participant and observer in developments of cosmic significance.

It is this kind of interaction between reader and text that greatly interested Proust. Unlike Ruskin, whose views on reading great books helped to stimulate his essay, Proust did not see reading as a conversation with 'men much wiser and more interesting than the people one happened to know in one's own circle'. To him, it was not so much a conversation as the communication from the text of a new set of thoughts, which one needs to internalise in order to see how one might make use of them. Reading for Proust provides an entry point or stimulus into one's spiritual or intellectual life. It does not

by itself constitute that life. Reading may give us desires and it may inspire us, but only we, the readers, can ensure that we receive the benefits from our reading. To do this requires effort on our part: our wisdom and insight begins where that of the author ends. We need to scrutinise our responses to the text and ensure that we are making active, intelligent use of what we have read, instead of passively letting the reading take over our minds (Proust, 1997, pp. 27–29, 32, 34, 37–38). As Carlyle put it, the reader should not be encouraged 'to lie down at his ease, and be ministered to' (1899, p. 57). In the modern world, as George Steiner has pointed out, finding the time to do this outside academia (and even there) is far from easy, and any nostalgia for the time when servants might be found at the top of a ladder lovingly dusting the books of one's library while one spent the day curled up reading would, in his view, be wholly out of place (Steiner, 2007, p. 24).

Proust talked about the significance when reading of raising one's head from the text (*lire en levant la tête*). It was an idea picked up by Barthes. Only if one does this, thinks about the myriad of impressions arising from one's reading, and integrates these with the world outside the text, will one's reading cease to be other than an escape from one's life and instead become a shaping factor in it. This is the theme of a fascinating book by Marielle Macé, *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (*Ways of reading, ways of being*), which also points out that a variant in Proust of raising one's head from the text is reading in the train (*lire dans le train*) while intermittently taking in all the impressions from outside the window during the journey. Macé sees the idea that there are different ways of conceiving of ourselves and a choice to be made between them as a distinctive feature of modernity and one in which books can easily provide us with potential models (Macé, 2011, pp. 20–22, 39–55, 61–66). It is common for the meaning of a text, as perceived by the reader, to be shaped by his or her desires, aspirations, and prior view of the world. It is a 'transmigration of meaning', in the words of Manguel, which can either enlarge or impoverish the text but which 'invariably … imbues the text with the circumstances of the reader' (Manguel, 1996, p. 211). One might add that it is not just the text but also the circumstances of the reader that may be enlarged or impoverished depending on the extent to which she or he reflects on what is happening in this situation. Texts, of course, as this book has shown in the case of each of its seven authors, say different things to different people in different generations, as individuals and societies change. Fischer talks about readers reinventing themselves with each reading. 'We are what we read and what we read is what we are', he writes (Fischer, 2003, p. 344). Adam Phillips,

echoing Harold Bloom, argues the need for 'strong readers' for whom 'what does this book mean?' is a far less important question than 'what is it good for, what can I do with it, what can I make it mean?' (Phillips, 2012, pp. 130–132)

This kind of relativism, however, can be taken too far. If, like Narcissus, all we see in books is our own reflection, not only are we doing their authors an injustice, but we are also severely limiting what we can learn. It continues to be important to try and establish what authors are trying to say even though sometimes this may be difficult and even though this may not always be what mostly interests us about a book (Young, 2017, pp. 44–45).

This book has set out to establish what seven authors were trying to say in seven texts, as well as what they might sometimes have been saying without necessarily intending to do so. It has also identified some of the many ways in which these texts have been read over long periods of time by people from very different backgrounds and who, on raising their heads from their scrolls, parchments, printed books, or e-readers, whether at home, in gardens, in libraries, or on trains, have looked out from the same texts on very different worlds. These works have had an important role in the transmission of distinctive ways of seeing the world characteristic of a particular civilisation. They are also testimony to the centrality of a culture of reading within this civilisation and the value this brings as a basis for the exercise of judgement. This is above all what I have wanted to emphasise at a time when, in the cultural lives of our societies and especially in our educational institutions, transmission can seem remote from the concerns of a very present-centred world and the very idea of a cultural identity, especially of a Western or European one, dismissed as a divisive ideological tool (O'Gorman, 2017, p. 163; Furedi, 2015, p. 214).

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SEVEN BOOKS THAT EVERYONE ONCE READ AND NO ONE NOW DOES

'This is a fascinating and very timely book. As someone who did not receive a classical education, I found it compelling reading – nothing short of a page-turner. It is beautifully written, interesting, scholarly, well researched and, in view of the challenges to Western civilisation, highly relevant. It shows with great clarity how classical writing, together with Christianity, came to shape our heritage as nations. Nick Tate has had a remarkably successful career in education, and this book is outstanding evidence of his historical and literary talent. It deserves to be widely read in schools, colleges, universities and by all who are intellectually curious.'

– Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach
Head of Policy Unit and Chief Policy Adviser
to Margaret Thatcher (1985–1990),
Member of the House of Lords

This is a book about books that played a significant part in the 2,000+-year-old civilisation that Europeans have in common. It considers seven books that, over long periods of time, had large numbers of readers – in some cases from Dublin to Budapest and Stockholm to Naples – but which are now rarely read outside the scholarly communities that guard their memory. The books range in time from Cicero's *On Duties* in the first century BC to Walter Scott's *Waverley* in the early nineteenth century.

For each book, its background and that of its author are described, its contents discussed, its reception over time and across countries traced, and the reasons for its great popularity and eventual neglect analysed. The effects of changes of medium – from papyrus to parchment to paper and printing – are explored, and attention is given to where and when each book was read, by what kinds of people, and in what format. Unusual recorded uses of books – Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as a collar press, Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* as a weapon, Malory's *Morte Darthur* as a window stop – are noted. The author also reflects on the history of his own encounter with each of the books, and on the physical or other characteristics that affected his response.

This is a work that demonstrates the central place of the book in European culture. It concludes with a recommendation to read these seven books, and with a discussion of the different types and purposes of reading – to encounter great minds from the past, to analyse the book's impact on oneself, when totally engrossed, when intermittently raising one's head from the text and, most blissfully of all, when alone and glancing out of the windows of a train.

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