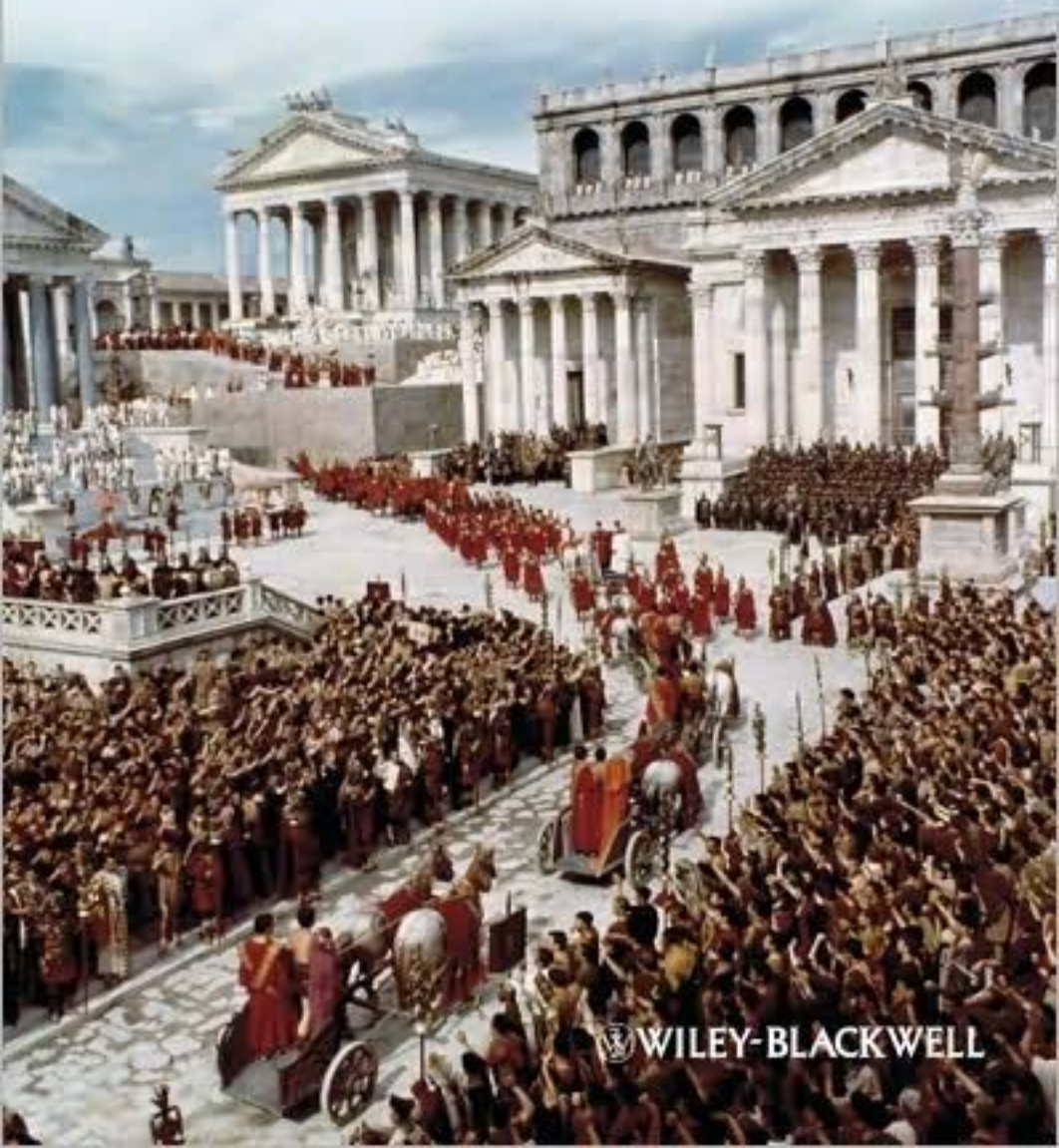


EDITED BY MARTIN M. WINKLER

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

FILM AND HISTORY



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

The Fall of the Roman Empire

*The Fall of
the Roman Empire*
Film and History

Edited by

Martin M. Winkler

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Notes on Contributors

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ANTHONY MANN (1906–1967) is among the least appreciated of major American film directors. After working in the theater he began directing small-budget films, especially in the genre of *film noir*, in the 1940s. In the 1950s he directed, among a few other films, a series of tough and dark Westerns, the main basis of his high reputation among cinema aficionados today. The last two of these, *Man of the West* (1958) and *Cimarron* (1960, disowned by Mann), bear mythic-epic overtones and point toward the historical epics he made for producer Samuel Bronston in Europe, *El Cid* (1961) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). His last completed film was the World War II drama *The Heroes of Telemark* (1965). He died while filming *A Dandy in Aspic* (1968), a Cold War espionage thriller. Mann had also directed, uncredited, the Fire of Rome sequence in Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951) and was the original director of *Spartacus* (1960) before Stanley Kubrick.

PETER W. ROSE is Professor of Classics at Miami University of Ohio. He has published articles on classical literature and on Cuban cinema and has written analyses of films for various leftist political newsletters. His book *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece* applied Marxist critical perspectives to the Greek literary canon.

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Editor's Preface

Upon its release in 2000 Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* was one of the most surprising box-office hits worldwide. The story, primarily unfolding on a gloomy frontier, in a scorching desert, and in the Colosseum, is about a doomed hero who has fallen from favor and power. But he comes back as if from the dead and takes revenge on a creepy megalomaniac. A gigantic battle in a forest primeval, several episodes of savage arena combat, spectacular settings, and romantic love pique viewer interest. Nothing quite like this had been seen on the cinema screen for decades. Made at great expense, directed by someone with a proven record for atmosphere, starring an actor at the height of his popularity and an attractive supporting cast, and boasting state-of-the art computerized special effects, *Gladiator* resurrected not only imperial Rome at the height of its power but also single-handedly revived interest in a film genre considered to have been dead, buried, and unlamented since the 1960s.

A noteworthy aspect of all the publicity that studio, star, writer, director, and others advanced to promote this new Roman spectacle, however, was the almost complete silence about an epic film that bears a strong resemblance to theirs. It is unlikely that *Gladiator* would have been possible without *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Released in 1964, this film had been produced by independent studio head Samuel Bronston, who

specialized in historical epics made with lavish care, and filmed in Spain (exteriors) and Italy (interiors at Cinecittà). It was directed by Anthony Mann, a distinguished director best known (if not popularly so) for his 1940s work in *film noir* and for his 1950s Westerns. The script had been written chiefly by blacklisted screenwriter Ben Barzman, with extensive historical research by Basilio Franchina and a hand from Philip Yordan, the head of Bronston's story department. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was the most accomplished presentation of Roman history ever put on the silver screen. But it was also the last of the giant epics about classical Rome until *Gladiator*, if we discount Richard Lester's more modest *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). Together with Joseph. L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* of 1963 and George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* of 1965, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was one of the three most expensive ancient epic films ever made. These three represent the precarious heights of scale and cost that epic films set in antiquity could reach before the age of digital images. In retrospect, their fate was predictable. *Cleopatra*, the most ambitious of them, was as good as ruined when it was re-edited and released in versions lacking as much as half of its original footage. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* has never been shown in its original length since its initial release and lacks a full hour of footage even in its current DVD editions.

The Fall of the Roman Empire also suffered some notable cuts. It was released at a running time of 184 minutes, including overture, intermission, and exit music. The film was later shortened by about half an hour. Even its original release version reveals a variety of cuts and changes. The only completely uncut version is reported to have been released on Super 8 mm in the early 1990s, taken from an original 16 mm negative. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was filmed in 70 mm (with an aspect ratio of 2.20:1) but shown in most theaters in 35 mm (aspect ratio of 2.35:1). It has been as good as unavailable for viewing on a theater screen for over forty years. Television and videotape editions further reduced its epic quality. The director's elegant visual compositions and the grandeur of the film's sets were destroyed in the pan-and-scan version of the shortened cut. This version also omitted a crucial plot point concerning the parentage of Commodus. The original version was briefly available during the 1990s in letterbox format on laserdisc, a short-lived video format. This edition became the source of bootleg DVDs. A legitimate DVD edition of the original release, with digitally restored images and soundtrack, did not appear until 2008. Home theater owners at least can now approximate what the film was meant to look like, even if it still does not provide a director's or fully restored cut.

Until recently, then, only few audiences who have been able to attend special screenings in revival theaters or museums could appreciate *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. This is regrettable, for it is an unusual work:

Anthony Mann . . . and his various collaborators . . . examine Roman thought at its most civilised peak, at a time when the Empire was a still manageable instrument for the dissemination of ideas . . . By thus making Rome the 'hero' rather than the traditional 'villain' . . . Mann and Bronston were breaking new ground.

Spectacle, always geared to show Rome in the guise of imperialistic oppressor, was consequently to play a different role: this was to be a discussion on power and corruption swathed in traditional epic clothes.¹

The silence of those concerned in the making and marketing of *Gladiator* – a veritable *damnatio memoriae* of the older film, to put it in Roman terms – is therefore unfortunate and unjustified.²

The present book undertakes the first critical re-evaluation of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* from historical, film-historical, and contemporary points of view. It is also a companion volume to essay collections on Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* that I have edited earlier.³ Chapter One is a general introduction, critical of the film's

¹ Quoted from Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 105.

² If silence could not be maintained, coy reticence was resorted to. Diana Landau (ed.), *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), limits itself to the following brief comments: "Also in the category of interesting failures was Anthony Mann's 1964 film *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose plot featured several of the main characters who later appeared in *Gladiator*" (19–20). A one-page list of Roman epics ("Reel Life in the Ancient World," 21) includes *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, "but Anthony Mann's intelligent epic was lost on most sixties audiences." The condescending tone and the downplaying of plot similarities here hints at a measure of defensiveness. A producer of *Gladiator* observes that actress Connie Nielsen reminded him of "a young Sophia Loren in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*" (56; Loren had been about five years younger than Nielsen when she played Lucilla), and Richard Harris "gave *Gladiator* the strongest link with the past of Roman-era spectacles on film. Back in the early 1960s, when Anthony Mann was casting *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Harris was originally signed to play the role of Commodus" (59; followed by a mention of Alec Guinness and by Harris's reminiscence of "a big row with the director" before leaving the film). Landau, 18–21, provides a total of six images from Roman films other than *Gladiator* in this lavishly illustrated book; none is from or about Mann's film.

³ Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) and *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). On the relations of *Gladiator* to popular and film culture cf. my brief summary (in Latin), "Quomodo stemma *Gladiatoris* pelliculae more philologico sit constituendum," *American Journal of Philology*, 124 (2003), 137–141.

weaknesses (some) but appreciative of its virtues (many). The next four chapters turn to Roman history and culture as the film represents them. Chapter Two deals with its divergences from the historical record, also discussing some contemporary issues that influenced its making. Chapters Three and Four deal with the two emperors who play major parts in the film's story, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Chapter Five focuses on the film's presentation of the East, an aspect too often neglected in studies of epic films about the Roman Empire. Chapter Six reprints a valuable short essay by director Anthony Mann, written around the time of the film's release. (On the essay's unfortunate title see my comments in the head note to that chapter.) Chapter Seven consists of some excerpts from the American souvenir book of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* that illustrate how a modern historian involved in its production presents imperial Rome to readers and viewers and what importance the studio attached to its re-creation of the Forum Romanum, the film's most spectacular and thematically important setting. Chapter Eight demonstrates the extent to which the film reflects the influence of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the work that was Anthony Mann's inspiration and gave the film its title. Chapter Nine argues that history and historical fiction have certain narrative strategies and goals in common, not least that of imparting to their audiences an understanding of or feeling for history. Nevertheless, historiography and historical narratives in word or image that imaginatively combine fact with fiction should be evaluated by criteria appropriate to each kind. The charge of factual inaccuracy commonly advanced against the historical novel, drama, or film is therefore beside the point. Finally, Chapters Ten and Eleven examine specific modern political, social, and cinematic influences on *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and how it combines the past with the present thematically and stylistically.

Like all other historical films *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is best watched and evaluated alongside the historical record. For this reason translations of the principal ancient sources about Emperor Marcus Aurelius and brief excerpts from Gibbon complement the analytical essays. These texts will guide readers interested in comparing history and film or in tracing the changes that may occur when the past is adapted to a popular medium of the present. With the exception of Herodian's account of Commodus' accession, however, ancient sources about this emperor's rule are not included here. The most important of them are readily available in the volume on *Gladiator* mentioned above.

Readers will observe that there is no complete consensus between and among contributors about the qualities of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

But our differences should prove to be an incentive for readers to approach both Roman history and cinematic epic from a new perspective. The present book does not of course exhaust the variety of possible approaches to the historical, cultural, or cinematic aspects of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Its contents are intended to point readers, especially scholars, teachers, and students, in the direction of further avenues of work on this film and on its historical and cultural foundations, whether ancient or modern. The readers we hope for are those interested in history and its survival in popular culture, in the classical tradition, and in cinema and its cultural and artistic importance. We also address academic readers in classical studies, ancient and modern history, intellectual history, American studies, and cinema and media studies. All contributions are written in non-specialized English and without academic jargon. Quotations from classical texts appear in translation, and words or phrases in Latin and Greek are explained or translated. We provide documentation and further references, sometimes extensively so that readers can pursue individual topics the more easily on their own. If we succeed in persuading them to think anew about Roman history and culture and about historical cinema or to watch *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and other historical films, especially *Gladiator*, with greater understanding or appreciation, our book will have achieved its goal.

As editor of this volume I am grateful, first and foremost, to my contributors for their willing and enthusiastic participation. Since the idea of the *pax Romana* plays a central part in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and in Roman history, they will, I hope, allow me to coin the phrase *pax academica* as a way to characterize our fruitful co-operation. I also owe special thanks to William Bronston, the producer's son, to Norma Barzman, the chief screenwriter's widow, to Anna Mann and Nina Mann, the director's widow and daughter, and to Samuel Bronston biographer Mel Martin. All of them have provided me with valuable information and sometimes with unique behind-the-scenes details about the production history of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

For some illustrations I am once again indebted to William Knight Zewadski, who with his customary generosity allowed me free access to film stills from his extensive collection. As before, Al Bertrand at the press deserves my thanks for his interest in and support of this project from its inception. I also thank the always reliable staff for efficiently seeing the book through the production process. Elizabeth Stone, my copy-editor, was a model of efficiency and reliability.

Academic books that collect essays on a particular topic by divers hands often contain the proceedings of conferences or symposia or have

been commissioned by a publisher. Sometimes, as in the present case, their origin lies in the editor's interest in or even passion for a particular topic. Here this passion is twofold, encompassing equally Roman history and the cinema. The book's genesis may be traced back to a particular moment several decades ago. A sixteen-year-old German schoolboy, enrolled in a *humanistisches Gymnasium*, one weekday afternoon finished his Latin homework and took a bus to one of those great old movie palaces in the center of town. It was showing a film with an irresistible title: *Der Untergang des römischen Reiches*.

Sic itur ad astra cinematographica.



1. Marble statue of Marcus Aurelius in the National Museum, Rome. Editor's photograph.



2. Equestrian bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitoline Hill (Campidoglio) in Rome. Editor's photograph.



3. Portrait of Edward Gibbon from the American edition of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 1804–1805). Editor's collection.

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4. An exceptional studio portrait of Alec Guinness as Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor. The William Knight Zewadski Collection.

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5. Sketch for the set of the Roman frontier fortress by Veniero Colasanti and John Moore. Photofest.

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7. Anthony Mann (l.) lining up a shot in the Roman fortress, with Stephen Boyd (r.) as Livius. Photofest.

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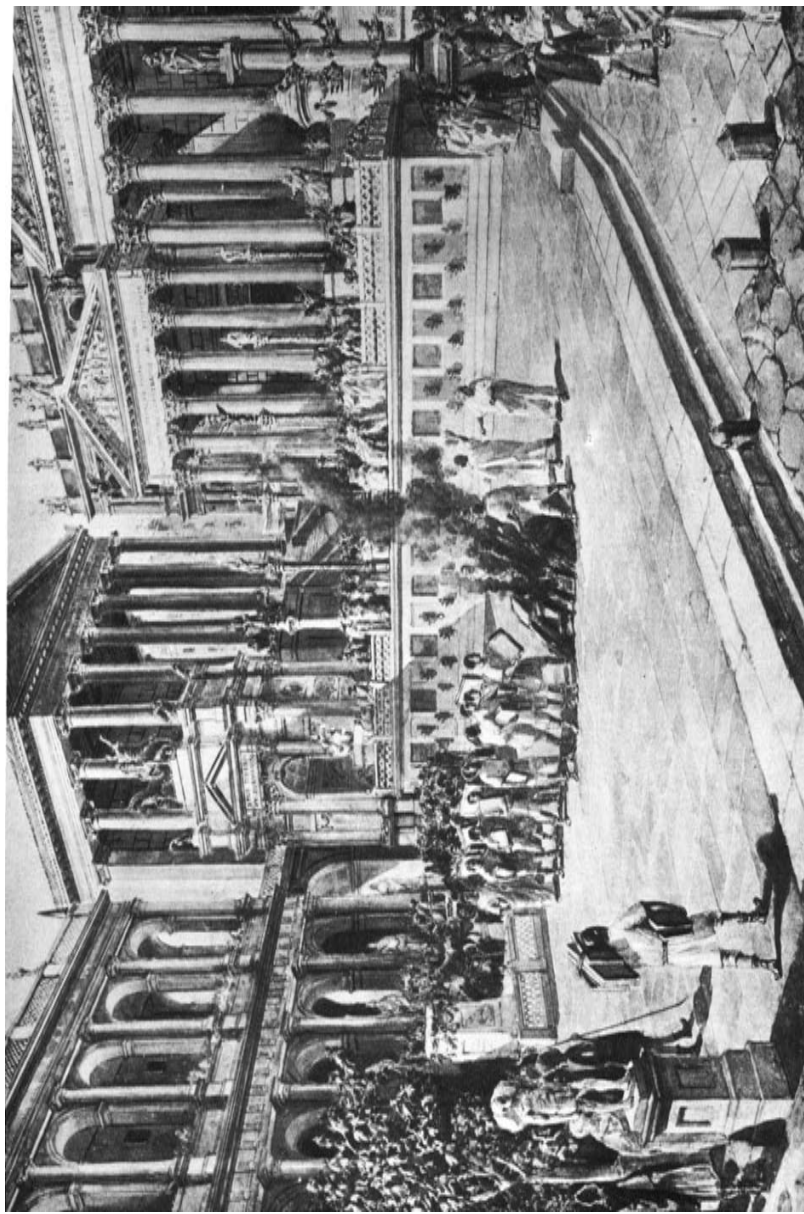
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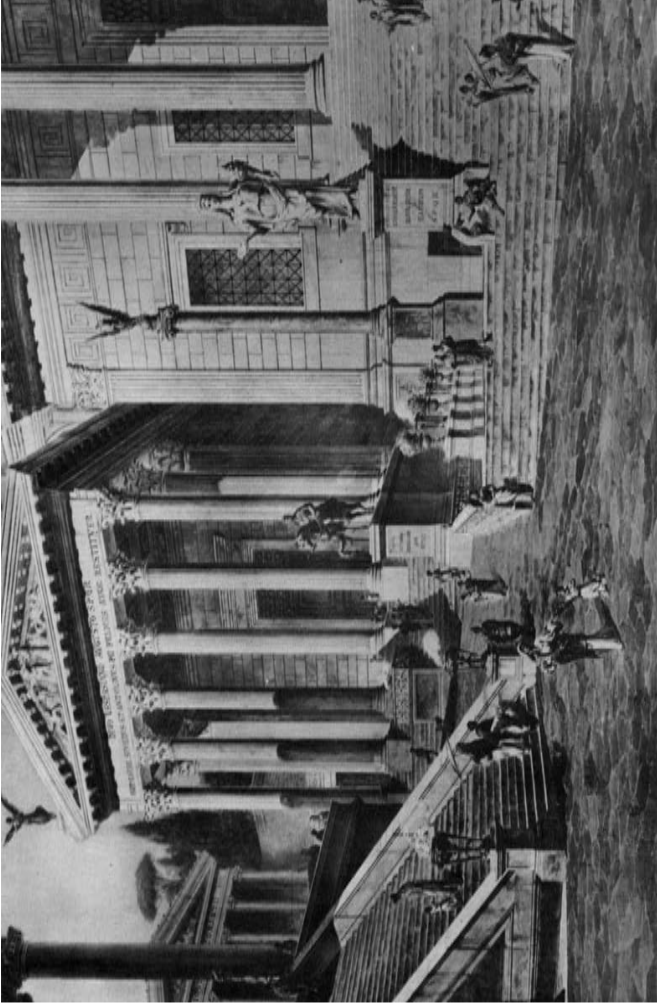
9. Director Anthony Mann examining models for the set of the Roman Forum. Photofest.

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10. Producer Samuel Bronston (r.) on the set of the Roman Forum. Photo-fest.



11. The Speakers' Platform (*rostrae*, ctr.), the Arch of Tiberius (l.), and Duiliius' Column (the *columna rostrata*; far r.) in the Roman Forum. Giuseppe Gatteschi, *Restauri della Roma imperiale* (1924), p. 11.



12. The Temple of Vespasian (l.) and the Temple of Concord (r.), with the steps (foreground l.) leading up to the Temple of Saturn in the Roman Forum. Giuseppe Gatteschi, *Restauri della Roma imperiale* (1924), p. 9.

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13. The Temple of Jupiter (ctr. background) dominating the Roman Forum. Photofest.

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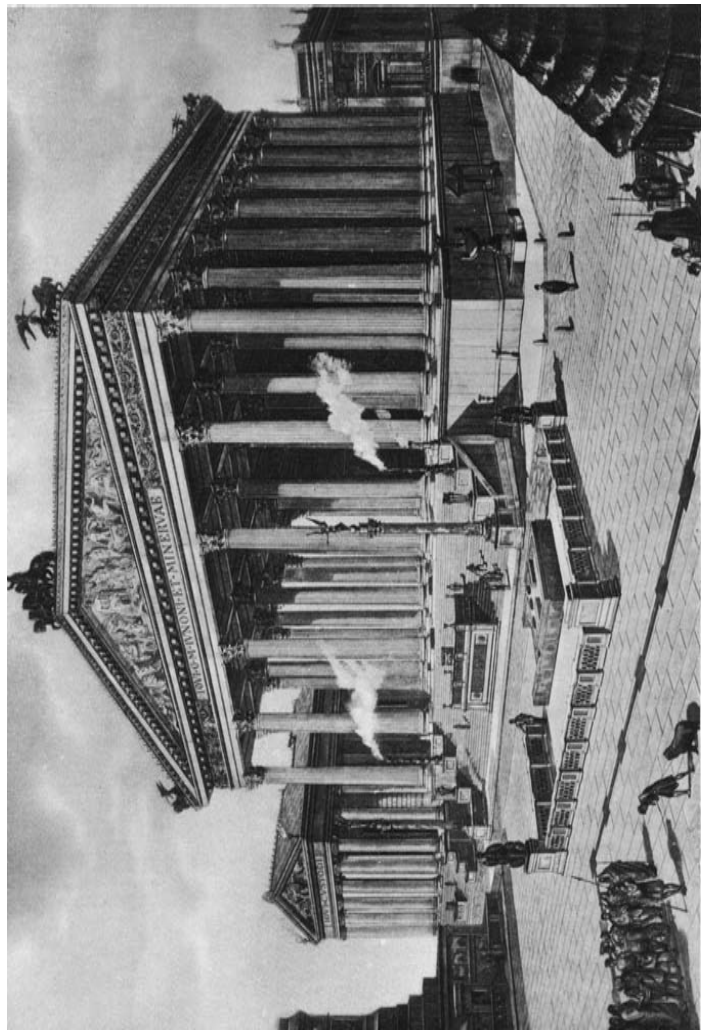
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15. The arena of shields in the Roman Forum for the duel between Commodus and Livius. The William Knight Zewadski Collection.

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16. The duel in the Colosseum between Commodus and Maximus in *Gladiator*. Universal-Dreamworks SKG.



di G. GATTESCHI.

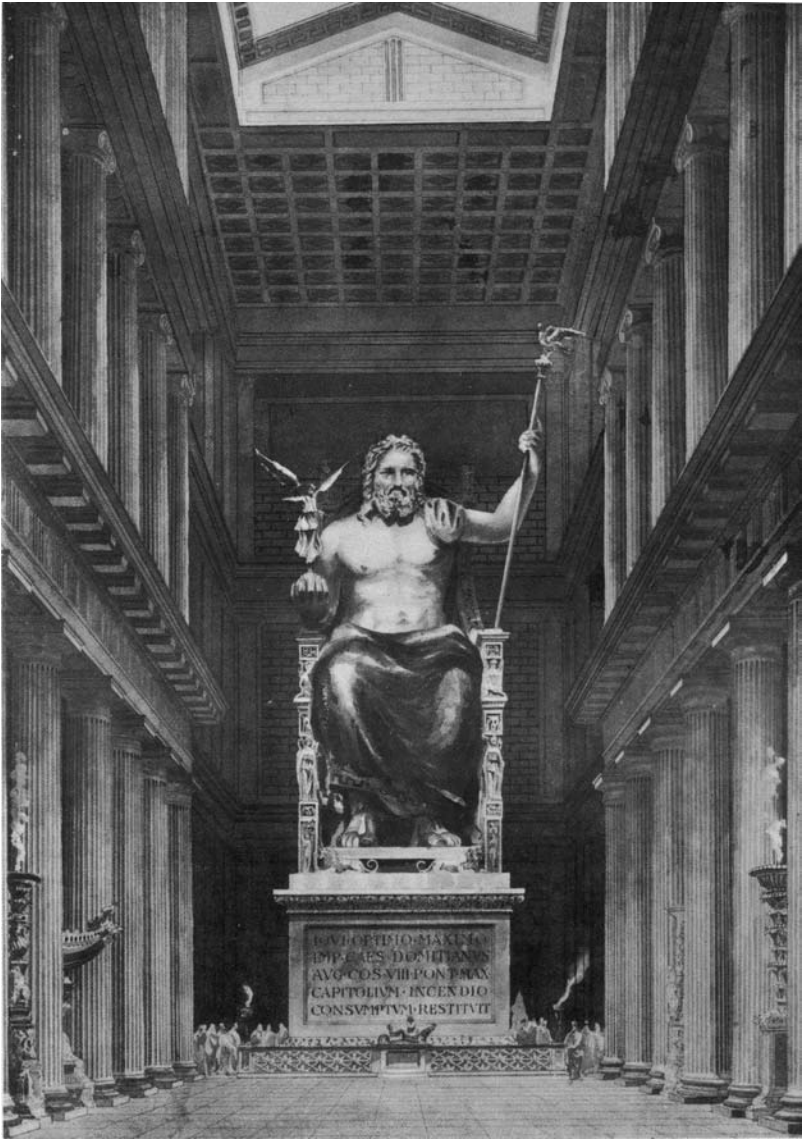
Aut. Tabacco, di

ESTERNO DEL TEMPIO DI GIOVE CAPITOLINO
ARA DELLA GENTE GIULIA - GIOVE CUSTODE - CAPANNA DI ROMOLO

ESTERNO DEL TEMPIO DI GIOVE CAPITOLINO

EXTÉRIEUR DU TEMPLE DE JUPITER CAPITOLIN

17. The Temple of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus (“Jupiter Best and Greatest”). Giuseppe Gatteschi, *Restauri della Roma imperiale* (1924), p. 3.



18. The statue of Jupiter inside his temple. Giuseppe Gatteschi, *Restauri della Roma imperiale* (1924), p. 5.

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19. The statue of Jupiter inside his temple as built by Veniero Colasanti and John Moore. Photofest.

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20. The statue of Jupiter with the head of Commodus, the god's head lying on the ground (foreground l.), Samuel Bronston Productions.

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21. Publicity shot of Stephen Boyd and Sophia Loren in one of the imperial palace sets. Photofest.

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22. The imperial palace with wall decorations copied from surviving mosaics in the Baths of Caracalla. Samuel Bronston Productions.

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23. A statue of Roma, the divine personification of Rome, dominates the palatial hall in which Lucilla deposits her father's *Meditations* and Commodus announces his New World Order. Samuel Bronston Productions.

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24. The simple décor of the senate hall and the Roman she-wolf behind Commodus represent the traditional virtues that made Rome great. Timonides (ctr. l.) and Julianus (to the r. behind him) debate Roman policy toward the Germans. The William Knight Zewadski Collection.

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25. The title card of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, with PAX ROMANA crossed out (l.). Samuel Bronston Productions.

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26. The end title of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Samuel Bronston Productions.

CHAPTER ONE

A Critical Appreciation of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Martin M. Winkler

I believe in the nobility of the human spirit . . .

I don't believe in anything else.

– Anthony Mann (1964)

I miss the values of family, nobility, personal sacrifice and
historical awareness that governed our films' heroes.

– Samuel Bronston (1988)

The preceding quotations characterize the approach to epic filmmaking by the director and the producer of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), but today their words are likely to strike us as old-fashioned or outdated. On our screens ancient Rome has usually been a sex-and-violence-driven imperialist society. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) prepared the way for such portrayals of Rome in the big Hollywood epics made after World War II.¹ Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) deals with Roman history mainly as blood sport. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) plumbs the

¹ I have described the latter in "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 50–76.

depths of supposedly authentic Roman torture and depravity and appeals equally to sadists and masochists. Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), written by the author of *Gladiator*, tells more of a Roman than a medieval story but manages only a minimal plot line on which to hang a series of violent fights and duels in a depressingly dark world. Doug Lefler's *The Last Legion* (2007) is in the same vein. On television, the two seasons of *Rome* (2005, 2007) show us an unrelievedly dark world of political intrigue, assassination, and nearly endless sex. Most Romans, it seems, were sexual deviants engaged in militarism, conquest, slavery, and bloody games. And they were pagans, Christ crucifiers, and religious persecutors. How could they ever have survived as long as they did, much less have inspired most of Western civilization? If modern evil empires last only for a few decades, how could Rome have continued from 753 BC, the traditional date of its foundation, to AD 476, the end of the Western empire as a political entity, or even until 1453 if we include the history of the Eastern or Byzantine empire? "Our roads and our ships connect every corner of the earth. Roman law, architecture, literature are the glory of the human race," Messala says in William Wyler's version of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1959). This may be so, but we never see any of it. And it is the villain who voices these words, only to be told off by the hero: "I tell you, the day Rome falls there will be a shout of freedom such as the world has never heard before." Nor would we learn much about the greatness of Roman civilization from other films – except one.

1. "See the Greatness of Rome"

As its title indicates, the true subject of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is not a heroic individual's fight against an oppressor or corrupt system, although this aspect of epic storytelling is part of its plot, nor is it about conflicting religious systems. Instead, the film is a serious attempt to do justice to Roman civilization and to make a case for the continuing importance of Roman history.²

² The present chapter does not duplicate my briefer assessment in "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154. For other classical scholars' perspectives on *The Fall of the Roman Empire* see Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 185–188; Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 83–92; and Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywood's Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), especially 177–193 and 337–

A brief look at how differently *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator*, its unofficial and unacknowledged remake, show us the city of Rome itself is instructive. Both contain scenes set in imperial palaces. Those in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are light and airy and attractive actually to live in. Those in *Gladiator* are dark and oppressive. The one building that defines Rome and its empire in *Gladiator* is the Colosseum, a place of violence and death.³ The Colosseum is nowhere to be seen in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose chief setting is the Roman Forum. The Forum is nowhere to be seen in *Gladiator* except in a brief sequence that parallels a far more elaborate one in the earlier film. Commodus enters the city in a triumphal procession through the Forum. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* this had been the audience's first glimpse of Rome, meant to overwhelm by sheer visual appeal. Commodus' parade in *Gladiator* consists of six or seven chariots and looks puny, even if thousands of computer-generated soldiers and people fill the area. And the Colosseum ominously looms in the background. Since director Scott copied visual compositions taken from Leni Riefenstahl's infamous *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the effect is depressing and forbidding.⁴ From the first, this Rome gives off an atmosphere of Albert Speer's design for Germania, the Nazis' megalomaniac new Berlin that was to rise after their Final Victory in World War II. The visual prominence and the dramatic function of the Colosseum and the Forum in their respective films tell us what we are to think of the people who ruled the world from this city. The Roman Forum was of such importance to the makers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* that they included an outline of its history in the film's American souvenir program (reprinted in this volume) which goes well beyond the normal bragging about size and cost of the set, which it also contains. Although it will not satisfy experts, this sketch provides readers – that is, the film's viewers – with a vivid impression of the importance of Rome and of the vicissitudes of “history's largest page,” as the Forum has been aptly called.⁵

346 (in comparison with *Gladiator*). See also the chapter by Bronston historian Jesús García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston* (Madrid: Ediciones del Imán, 2000), 229–251. Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 105 and 108–109, gives one of the earliest appreciations of the film.

³ Cf. my “*Gladiator* and the Colosseum: Ambiguities of Spectacle,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 87–110.

⁴ Arthur J. Pomeroy, “The Vision of a Fascist Rome in *Gladiator*,” in Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History*, 111–123, examines the similarities between *Triumph of the Will* and *Gladiator*.

⁵ The phrase quoted is the title of the first chapter in William Vance, *America's Rome*, vol. 1: *Classical Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1–42.

The difference between *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator* is reinforced by the films' portrayals of their Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. *Gladiator* focuses on Commodus, the villain who kills his father with his own hands. Marcus is dead and gone after about a quarter of the film's length (in its original release version). Even in this first part he is overshadowed by Commodus. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Marcus Aurelius is the central figure of the film's entire first half, the one dominant personality who determines how audiences are to respond to the world he rules. He appears in the very first scene. From *Gladiator* we would not know that Marcus Aurelius was an emperor decisively in command. Our first glimpse of him shows us a somewhat befuddled and worried-looking old man, who is passively watching from a distance what his general is accomplishing single-handedly against the barbarians. His later appearances only reinforce our impression of his ineffectual nature. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, although also elderly and in fragile health, Marcus makes difficult political and military decisions, addresses a large assembly of the empire's leaders, and holds his own against Commodus. This Commodus will in due course turn into a tyrant and, similarly to the Commodus of *Gladiator*, will undo what Marcus wanted to achieve once he has succeeded him to the throne, but during Marcus' lifetime he is no match for him. Others have to do the dirty work to put Commodus on the throne.

Nor would we know from *Gladiator* that Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher as well as an emperor. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, however, the Stoicism of the historical Marcus is represented by his *Meditations*, the personal reflections of Marcus Aurelius on life and death.⁶ A poignant scene in which Marcus is holding a mental dialogue with Death reflects several of the individual meditations in his collection. The *Meditations* are defined as being identical with the spirit of Roman civilization. "Let not these be destroyed," says Marcus' daughter, Lucilla, "for *this* is Rome." (Cf. on this Chapter Nine.) The brief scene in which she utters these words is emphatically placed at the opening of the film's second half and indicates what the ending will confirm: with the death of Marcus Aurelius and of his spiritual and political vision for Rome, civilization is lost. The decline of the empire is shown in moral and not in military terms. Rome has reached what today we might call the tipping point: recovery or rescue are impossible; the fall is inevitable. *Gladiator* never mentions the *Meditations*.

⁶ On the *Meditations* as self-revelation see P. A. Brunt, "Marcus Aurelius in His *Meditations*," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 64 (1974), 1–20.

The greatness of the historical Marcus Aurelius was celebrated in antiquity, and his reputation has survived until today. Modern verdicts, too numerous to be summarized or quoted here, have tended to emphasize his closeness to ourselves. Two examples may stand for many. To Matthew Arnold, writing in 1863, Marcus Aurelius “lived and acted in a state of society modern by its essential characteristics, in an epoch akin to our own.” He “thus becomes for us a man like ourselves.” This man Arnold characterizes as “perhaps the most beautiful figure in history” and “one of the best of men,” on the other hand as a “truly modern striver and thinker” and “a present source.”⁷ Such he remains today. In 1994 Nobel Prize-winning poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky addressed Marcus Aurelius himself:

Ave, Caesar. How do you feel now, among barbarians? For we are barbarians to you, if only because we speak neither Greek nor Latin. We are also afraid of death far more than you ever were, and our herd instinct is stronger than the one for self-preservation . . . We sure feel that by dying we stand to lose far more than you ever had, empire or no empire . . . We are your true Parthians, Marcomanni, and Quadi, because nobody came in your stead, and we inhabit the earth. Some of us go even further, barging into your antiquity, supplying you with definitions.

About the *Meditations* Brodsky concludes: “if *Meditations* is antiquity, it is we who are the ruins.”⁸

In popular culture Marcus Aurelius can even be a future source, if only in disguise. In the original trilogy of his *Star Wars* films (1977–1983) George Lucas presents us with a wise teacher and warrior who bears an uncanny resemblance in appearance and function to the Roman emperor. Our first glimpse of Marcus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows him wearing a cloak whose hood covers his head, the appropriate

⁷ Matthew Arnold, “Marcus Aurelius,” in R. H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 133–157; quotations at 140 and 136. Arnold’s essay first appeared in *The Victoria Magazine*, 2 (November, 1863), 1–19. Cf. also the brief remarks by Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, rev. ed. (1923; rpt. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972; several rpts.), 681–682. The emperor’s most recent fictional recreation is by Alan Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius: The Dialogues* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2005). Ancient voices on Marcus’ reputation are summarized by Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), 224–225 and 289 (notes).

⁸ Joseph Brodsky, “Homage to Marcus Aurelius,” in Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995; rpt. 1997), 267–298; quotations at 289–290 and 293.

way to conduct a sacrifice. Lucas's Obi-Wan Kenobi is usually dressed in a similar way. That both Marcus and Obi-Wan are played by the same actor only clinches the case.⁹ O be one with Marcus, noble Jedi knight!

The portrayal of the philosophical emperor as an ideal human and dedicated statesman in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* adds a memorable instance to these and similar tributes, readily comprehensible even to those unacquainted with ancient philosophy or history. The similarity of actor Alec Guinness to Marcus Aurelius goes deeper than the nearly uncanny resemblance in facial features and hairstyle that is obvious to all who have seen ancient portraits or statues of Marcus. The film's emperor also speaks and acts in accordance with his ancient model. The most famous ancient work of art that depicts Marcus Aurelius is his equestrian statue on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. It combines expressions of majestic power and benign dignity. A modern author shows best, if somewhat romantically, what impression the statue makes on its viewer. In his 1860 novel *The Marble Faun* Nathaniel Hawthorne gives the following description:

The moonlight glistened upon traces of the gilding, which had once covered both rider and steed; these were almost gone; but the aspect of dignity was still perfect, clothing the figure as it were with an imperial robe of light. It is the most majestic representation of the kingly character that ever the world has seen. A sight of this old heathen Emperour is enough to create an evanescent sentiment of loyalty even in a democratic bosom; so august does he look, so fit to rule, so worthy of man's profoundest homage and obedience, so inevitably attractive of his love! He stretches forth his hand, with an air of grand beneficence and unlimited authority, as if uttering a decree from which no appeal was permissible, but in which the obedient subject would find his highest interests consulted; a command, that was in itself a benediction.¹⁰

Hawthorne's words are admirably sensitive to the aura of unlimited but in this case benign imperial power that is embodied in an emperor's mighty right hand, the *ingens dextra* mentioned in Roman literature.¹¹

⁹ For more details cf. my "Star Wars and the Roman Empire," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 272–290.

¹⁰ The text of *The Marble Faun; or, The Romance of Monte Beni* is here quoted from Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Novels*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: Viking / Library of America, 1983), 990–991. The description of Emperor Justinian's equestrian statue in the Augustaeum in Constantinople by the historian Procopius (*On Buildings* 1.2.10–12) indicates how closely Hawthorne captured the spirit of such statuary.

¹¹ The phrase occurs in Statius, *Silvae* 3.4.61. Cf. Martial, *Epigrams* 4.30.4–5, 4.8.10 (an *ingens manus*), and 6.1.5 (Caesar's *magnae manus*).

In 1909 Henry James was to refer to Hawthorne's description with approval. He quotes Hawthorne's impression about the commanding benediction of Marcus' hand and points to the "admirably human character of the figure."¹² A modern art historian similarly speaks of the emperor's "commanding gesture of benediction." He continues:

The sense of the gesture of Marcus Aurelius' right hand and, in consequence, the effect of the entire work would, indeed, be quite different were that gesture deprived of the universal meaning with which it greets and blesses its viewers.¹³

Another art historian calls this imperial posture the "gesture of power and benediction" and observes:

The supernatural redeeming power in the emperor's outstretched right hand presupposes higher powers and abilities dwelling in him. Through the emperor, manifesting his power in this gesture, divine interference in human affairs takes place.¹⁴

Viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, especially those familiar with the times and the thought of Marcus Aurelius, can immediately respond emotionally and intellectually to the ideal Rome the film shows us, first in its portrait of the emperor and what he stands for, then in the impressive set of the Forum, the visible symbol of this ideal and the decisive place of action in the film's second half.

The man who made it possible for us to be visually transported back to the Rome of Marcus Aurelius is Samuel Bronston, who spared no cost for this film.¹⁵ Although he was a wily producer, all of his epic films

¹² Henry James, *Italian Hours* (1959; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 141–142; quotation at 142.

¹³ Phillip Fehl, "The Placement of the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 37 (1974), 362–367 and plates 80–82; quotations at 365 and 366. Claudio Parisi Presicce, *The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in Campidoglio*, ed. Anna Mura Sommella, tr. Andrew Ellis and Carol Rathman (Milan: Silvana, 1990), 89–108, gives an illustrated overview of the statue's history.

¹⁴ Quoted from H. P. L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (1953; rpt. New Rochelle: Caratzas, 1982), 145 and 147.

¹⁵ This could and sometimes did lead to (Roman-style?) excess and corruption. Cf. the experience film director Richard Fleischer describes in connection with a historical epic never made: "I went about my job of preparing the picture, trying to save money wherever I could. The resistance from everyone was considerable, even nasty. The art directors, [Veniero] Colasanti and [John] Moore, went into a positive snit when I restrained them from building large portions of sets I knew I'd never photograph. . . . Everyone was used

evinced an ulterior non-commercial involvement. Bronston was “an acute and generous businessman whose belief in quality spectacles led to the engagement of the finest talents [available] for each of his enterprises.”¹⁶ Looking back on his career in 1988, he said:

I consider myself a twentieth-century artist whose medium consists of the most complicated elements: armies of talented people, huge financial capital, awesome communications technologies, and a collective of creative peers whose brilliance and discipline set a standard of quality that is still a global source of inspiration. Over the years my companies have worked to produce a sense of national and international pride through epic images of heroism, telling the most passionate of stories of all time: the Bible [in *King of Kings*], Spain’s mythology [in *El Cid*], Rome, Peking [in *55 Days at Peking*, about the Boxer Rebellion], the American Revolution [in *John Paul Jones*] . . . [Now] I miss the values of family, nobility, personal sacrifice and historical awareness that governed our films’ heroes . . . I miss seeing the kind of cinematic quality, the art and fineness that drove our work and characterized our films.

What Bronston says about internationalism is best exemplified in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bronston’s production company was itself regularly called an empire, so we may adduce the words of a wise old senator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* to characterize Bronston himself: “when its people no longer believe in it . . . then does an empire begin to die.” Bronston strongly believed in the themes of his epics. Even in regard to the near-Roman luxuriousness that he was famous for lavishing on visiting dignitaries and celebrities and on his stars and business associates, Bronston’s quasi-imperial terminology in the passage quoted is apt. There is even a close analogy to imperial Roman courts, for in Michael Waszynski, his associate producer, Bronston had a close and trusted confidant who, however, used his position to divert large amounts of money into his own pockets and to live in ostentatious luxury as Prince Michael of Poland.¹⁷ Bronston himself felt a close affinity to the good emperor of his last epic:

to wallowing in unlimited funds. Economy and discipline were anathema.” Quoted from Richard Fleischer, *Just Tell Me When to Cry: A Memoir* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1993), 230. Moore and Colasanti had been the designers for *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Large parts of the Roman Forum, built in three dimensions and furnished even on the inside, were never used for filming.

¹⁶ Elley, *The Epic Film*, 105.

¹⁷ Norma Barzman, *The Red and the Blacklist: The Intimate Memoir of a Hollywood Expatriate* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press / Nation Books, 2003), 306–307, 327–328, and 349–350, recounts a number of details about “the phony Polish prince” (355). Waszynski had previously directed films in Poland and Italy.

In retrospect, of all the characters in my films, I identify most with Sir Alec Guinness' portrayal of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in his quest for *pax Romana*, for I have always been driven by the same hunger for world peace, world harmony, world friendship.¹⁸

Bronston's reputation has endured, as recollections of people who had worked with him show. One of his Spanish associates said: "Bronston had a special charm; he radiated a kind of light. He was accessible and very intelligent, though he lived in an ivory tower and was a dreamer."¹⁹ Director Andrew Marton, who had collaborated with other directors on some of Bronston's epics in the early 1960s, was even more fulsome in his praise:

This American-financed "film industry" in Spain has one, and only one, person as its originator . . . Samuel Bronston was a really great producer. This man alone was responsible for [films] . . . made by a person who cared, who wanted to make important[,] big, elegant and sumptuous motion pictures and who didn't skimp. He was . . . the kind of person who doesn't want to turn his studio into a supermarket, although you can make money that way too.²⁰

¹⁸ All of Bronston's words here quoted are taken from Mel Martin, *The Magnificent Showman: The Epic Films of Samuel Bronston* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor Media, 2007), 201–202 (spelling and punctuation slightly adjusted). Bronston made these statements when he received an award for *El Cid* from the Valladolid International Film Festival. García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 333, quotes shorter excerpts in a Spanish version that is a little more passionate about Marcus Aurelius ("a man obsessed with the search for the *pax Romana*"). Sir Alec Guinness was eventually joined in peerage by Sir James Mason, Sir Christopher Plummer, and Sir Anthony Quayle, making *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the most aristocratic of films. Bronston contributed, if not exclusively for humanitarian reasons, to the survival of two blacklisted screenwriters, Ben Barzman and Bernard Gordon; cf. Bernard Gordon, *Hollywood Exile: Or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 98–100 and 182–194, and Barzman, *The Red and the Blacklist*, 306–366. Barzman, 319, writes about Bronston: "Hardheaded and pragmatic . . . a cultivated, intelligent, widely traveled gentleman of the old school." And: "he had created a motion-picture fairy tale world with an opulence that rivaled and surpassed Hollywood at its height." Bronston was also adept at getting along with and even charming a modern absolute ruler, Spain's *Caudillo* ("Leader") Francisco Franco. On international filmmaking in Franco's Spain see now the overview by Neal Moses Rosendorf, "'Hollywood in Madrid': American Film Producers and the Franco Regime, 1950–1970," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27 no. 1 (2007), 77–109.

¹⁹ Quoted from Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy* (Denver: Arden Press, 1985), 66.

²⁰ Quoted from Joanne D'Antonio (interviewer), *Andrew Marton* (Metuchen: Directors Guild of America / Scarecrow Press, 1991), 413.

The Fall of the Roman Empire acquired the reputation of having caused the fall of Samuel Bronston's production company and even the end of epic filmmaking altogether: "It is a convenient, though nonetheless true, fact that *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is synonymous with the Fall of the Historical Epic."²¹ The film was too expensive – figures range from \$16 to \$20 million – to recuperate Bronston's investments. But such a claim, while not altogether groundless, is too sweeping. Bronston's arrangements with his American financier may have been a more decisive factor than has generally been allowed for. And the releases of George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and Richard Lester's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* during the next two years tell us something different about the disappearance of antiquity from cinema screens. International epic filmmaking, if not on ancient topics, successfully continued with David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* (1965–1967, released in four feature-length parts and one of the biggest and most accomplished epics of them all), and the same director's *Waterloo* (1970). If any one film must be blamed for the demise of the ancient epic, it has to be Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963). But even here it was more the accumulation of run-away cost as precipitated by several false starts, infighting among highest-level executives, and general wastefulness that brought the studio to the brink of ruin than the actual expense, size, or quality of Mankiewicz's film.²² So here, as in most other contexts, single-cause explanations blaming just one film tend to fall short of the mark.²³

As had happened in Rome, Bronston's studio, too, was auctioned off, and in the very heart of his empire: on its sound stages. But this auction took a lot longer than the ancient one. As Spanish television reported:

²¹ Quoted from Derek Elley, "The Fall of the Roman Empire," *Films and Filming*, 22 no. 5 (February, 1976), 18–24, at 18.

²² On its qualities and fate see my "Cleopatra (1963)," *Amphora*, 1 no. 2 (2002), 13–14. And then came the epic debacle of Richard Fleischer's *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), featuring one of the stars of *Cleopatra*, and provoking further power plays behind the scenes. The account of its production in John Gregory Dunne, *The Studio* (1969; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1998), is required reading for anyone interested in the *hubris* (and *ate*, but not *katharsis*) of mid-to-late 1960s Hollywood. As Dunne was aware, it was difficult not to write satire. What had worked only two years earlier, when *The Sound of Music* was the studio's biggest success, was suddenly passé. Two other large misfires, *Star!* (1968) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), were also able to do little for Twentieth Century-Fox.

²³ For introductory summaries on the decline of epic films see Allen Barra, "The Incredible Shrinking Epic," *American Film*, 14 no. 5 (March, 1989), 40–43, 45, and 60, and Vivian Sobchack, "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," *Representations*, 29 (Winter, 1990), 24–49, at 40–43.

“his gigantic cinema empire has crumbled . . . With over five hundred lots, in seven days, the auction has ended and, with it, a whole era of film history and splendor.”²⁴ The fall of Bronston’s empire inspired historian Will Durant, the celebrity consultant on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, to a melancholic outburst in Shakespearean eloquence:

Alas, what a fall there was, my countrymen! I had expected the critics to question the historicity of the film, and had steeled myself to being blamed; instead they condemned the picture on artistic grounds – too overwhelming a display of temples, spectacles, and battles; “spectaculars” had become too common, had lost their lure; and the enormous debt that the producer had incurred – partly through generosity to his employees – left his vast organization bankrupt. We [Durant and his wife Ariel] had not had much contact with Samuel Bronston, but we had come to like him, and we mourned his fate.²⁵

Marcus Aurelius exhorts his empire’s leaders: “Look about you . . . and see the greatness of Rome.” This is Bronston’s perspective as well: *Look at my epic and see the greatness of Rome!* And it is the perspective of Anthony Mann, the film’s director. If we respond to the words and images on the screen, we can know what Rome at its greatest was like, what sometimes it could have been, and what all too often in history it fell short of being. The ending of the film is of particular significance in this regard.

2. The Ending

If this film’s content and style are unusual, its ending is unique. The standard endings of Hollywood’s Roman epics show us a tyrant’s overthrow, which signals the beginning of a better society. This works especially well in connection with religious themes, which point to spiritual regeneration after political and moral degeneration. The ending of Mervyn LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis* (1951) is one of the best-known examples. Marcus Vinicius, its hero, and his friend muse about the fate of empires from Babylon to Rome after the death of Nero. The friend voices his hope for “a more permanent world . . . or a more permanent faith.” Marcus

²⁴ Quoted, in my translation, from García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 362. On the auction see also Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens*, 66. Further details concerning the end of Bronston’s company are available in a documentary-plus-interview short included on the 2008 DVD edition of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

²⁵ Quoted from Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 357.

answers: "One is not possible without the other." The final scene gives us heavenly choirs singing *Quo vadis, domine?* Good General Galba, the new emperor-to-be, will give Rome stability and justice, regardless of his own overthrow and the eruption of civil war that were soon to follow in history if not in *Quo Vadis*. In Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953), which saw the ascent to power of Caligula, the hero and his beloved are condemned to death, but they walk straight up to heaven. This happens by means of a special effect that changes the background scenery from the emperor's palace to God's kingdom, again with heavenly choirs singing their hearts out: "Hallelujah!" In the sequel, Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), the screaming madman Caligula is silenced for good and for the good of Rome, to which a mild and decent Emperor Claudius will restore order. His wife Messalina, one of the most notorious femmes fatales in ancient history, sees the error of her adulterous ways and publicly pledges to be a faithful wife and a model empress from now on. Even when the hero is powerless against an evil emperor's or general's earthly might and dies for his cause, nothing is lost, for his is a timeless spiritual victory. In DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* hero and heroine die together in the maws of the lions in Nero's arena, but the gigantic cross of light, formed when the gate of the dungeon closes behind them, symbolizes their victory. (And the heavenly choirs? Of course.) Also obvious are the endings of Wyler's *Ben-Hur* and Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), two of the most famous Roman epics made not long before *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the latter *Spartacus* unhistorically but to good dramatic effect dies on the cross for the sins of the Roman world. His wife and son survive; the baby represents the hope for a better future and the eventual end of slavery. *Ben-Hur* vanquishes the evil Roman Messala in a chariot-race duel but can do nothing about the tyranny of Rome. (Cf. below.) Nevertheless, at the film's end Jesus, dying on the cross, washes away the sins of the world and by a miracle restores *Ben-Hur* to his mother, sister, and sweetheart. Heavenly choirs duly reappear on the soundtrack for the fade-out. *Ben-Hur*'s inventor, however, had gone even further than the filmmakers, for in the final paragraph of his novel General Lew Wallace attributed the survival of Christianity during Nero's persecutions and by implication its very existence to his fictional hero. So much for the temporal power of the Caesars. All's well that ends well or reasonably well.

Decades later, the ending of *Gladiator* still conforms to this basic pattern. General Maximus kills Commodus in the duel that such plots invariably lead up to. But, treacherously stabbed in advance by cowardly Commodus, Maximus himself dies. In death he is reunited with his mur-

dered family whom he sees waiting for him in a final vision. Like the hero and heroine of *The Robe* and even more than Spartacus, Maximus is granted a kind of romantic happy ending, made bittersweet because he also leaves behind a woman who once had loved him and still does, Marcus Aurelius' daughter Lucilla. But even at death's door Maximus saves Rome. He commands to free Gracchus, the senator who will form or head the new senatorial government that Marcus Aurelius had intended for Rome to end the rule of the Caesars.²⁶ Maximus' last public pronouncement is: "There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius." Lucilla pays homage to him as he is being carried out of the arena – "He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him" – and confirms his crucial role in carrying out the regeneration of the empire: "Is Rome worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again." Her words are not addressed to anyone in particular, but all in the audience will readily apply them to the film's view of Rome. Yes, we believe it again. History was not like this noble and sentimental ending. There is hope for the future, as the film's final words, spoken by Maximus' friend and fellow gladiator Juba, tell us: "Now we are free" – as individuals, from slavery; as citizens, from tyranny. Here is a new birth of freedom. The last view of Rome before the fade-out confirms all this. In a panoramic long shot of the city the sun is breaking through the clouds. It is morning in Rome again. And the requisite choirs are swelling up, too, although in this case they are not heavenly but contemporary New Age ones. To quote Lucilla's earlier words from a different context: "This is a pleasant fiction, isn't it?" It is.

In this kind of ending tyranny and corruption are shown to be inherent in individuals, not in society as a whole. Once the villains are removed, things will improve, without any necessity for radical changes in the structures of government or society. The optimism on view in the cinema of Frank Capra may be the best representative of such populism: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941). The John Does, champions of losing or lost causes – the latter the only ones worth fighting for, as we hear in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* – still have a chance against big shots and political machines because theirs is a great society. It's a wonderful life after all. This kind of perspective also conforms to the long-standing American tradition that deals with defeat or death by turning it into a higher victory. A

²⁶ On the historical and film-historical aspects of this cf. my comments in "Gladiator and the Colosseum," 108–109, with references.

classic example is the ending of Raoul Walsh's epic Western about General Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). As in history, the main character is defeated and killed with his entire contingent, but his death proves his moral integrity. By dying for at least some of the country's sins, Custer posthumously ends the influence of unscrupulous politicians and businessmen over the federal government. He was a soldier of America, and the film, if not history, honors him. General Sheridan expressly says so to Custer's widow at the end, but his words are meant even more for us in the theater: "Your soldier has won his last fight." This, too, is a pleasant fiction, made palatable because it comes at the end of a mythicized heroic and romantic epic. Custer makes us believe it again.²⁷

In stark contrast is the ending of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. It, too, has the showdown between hero (Livius, the model for Maximus) and villain (Commodus). Commodus is killed, but Livius survives with Lucilla, his beloved. In standard cinema he would now assume the throne that is offered him, prove himself to be as good and just an emperor as we know him to have been a general, and save Rome from itself. None of this happens. Rome's decline and fall are unavoidable. Commodus has made sure of this with his dying command to burn the captive Germans, who curse Rome ("Wotan, avenge us!") and so foreshadow the eventual conquest of Italy and the Western empire by Germanic tribes. The Roman Empire will not be regenerated; the empire is up for auction. The structure cannot be repaired. Hamlet's stark verdict on the state of Denmark is fully applicable here: "rank corruption, mining all within / Infects unseen" – except that in this Rome corruption already *has* infected all within.²⁸ The rank corruption remains unseen by the people, who are engaged in empty celebrations as their society begins to collapse. The carnival-like atmosphere of song and dance that Anthony Mann shows us is anachronistic in its iconography – oversize masks worn by men on stilts – but eerily expressive. Without knowing it, the people are dancing on a volcano.

Livius does not speak of any dream that was Rome or of any improvement for the future. He rejects not only the imperial purple but all of Rome, walking off with Lucilla into what we may assume will be a private exile, away from all. The film's ending is presented to us as the irrevocable end. We hardly need the narrator telling us that what we have been watching for the last three hours was an example of a country

²⁷ I examine Walsh's film in "Homeric *kleos* and the Western Film," *Syllecta Classica*, 7 (1996), 43–54, at 45–48.

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.4.150–151.

on a course of blind self-destruction, the initial stage of a process to last for three centuries. Not even Livius can make us believe again. By the time we see and hear the last of the auction, he and Lucilla have already walked out of the frame as if they had never mattered. A new sunrise in *Gladiator* promises a new Rome; the sunny sky in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is blackened by the billowing clouds that waft over the Forum from the burning pyres of Germans and Roman senators who had opposed Commodus. There will be no new Rome.

Most extraordinary about the climactic duel between Commodus and Livius, however, is its pointlessness, to which Mann takes care to draw our attention. The duel is an accomplished action sequence (cf. below), but its thematic significance is even greater. As the duel approaches its climax, Mann cuts away to two of the observers in the Forum, an army commander who had been an ally of Livius but has recently succumbed to corruption, and one of Commodus' craven followers. The latter now turns to the commander: "Victorinus, no matter which one comes out alive, *you* have the power now. You have the army. Make me Caesar, and I'll give you one million dinars [i.e. *denarii*] in gold – one million 500,000 dinars." Victorinus ignores him and after Commodus' death quickly proclaims Livius Caesar to the people. The rabble, fickle as ever, shouts its assent. But Victorinus is just as fickle and quick to change sides again. After first betraying Livius he now urges him: "You're in command now, Livius. Rome is ours. Take the throne. Be Caesar." Victorinus evidently expects a large share of power and wealth from the new emperor. One of Commodus' other henchmen also shows his true colors, cutting his conscience to fit the cloth of the winning side: "Gaius Metellus Livius, the people are asking for you." The formality of his address reveals his sycophancy.

"No matter which one comes out alive" – these words carry an astonishing revelation: the very action that the whole plot has been moving towards and that in standard heroic stories provides the emotional payoff to their audiences turns out to be pointless. The "good guy" has at last defeated the "bad guy" and resolved the plot, but to no avail. Maximus both wins and dies in his duel with Commodus, but he is aware that he has accomplished something valuable and lasting for Rome, something that also serves to impart to the film's spectators a satisfying sense of poetic justice. Crime does not pay; villains bite the dust. Livius wins his duel as we expect him to do, but we do not expect him to end up roundly defeated in every other respect. The final words in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), one of the most powerful adaptations of Greek tragedy, will come to the minds of viewers devoted to portrayals of classical sub-

jects on film: “Nothing is possible anymore,” says Medea. Not even the hero’s last feat can change anything. Livius has been a soldier of Rome, the greatest of all, but nobody honors him. No one, certainly not Livius, considers the throne an honor. This Rome is not worth one good man’s life. Livius believed it once. But he cannot make himself believe it again. Or anyone else. The old senator’s diagnosis was correct: “when its people no longer believe in it . . . then does an empire begin to die.”

The beauty and greatness of Rome, evinced visually by the film’s architecture and thematically by Marcus Aurelius, the humane philosopher-emperor, by the philosopher Timonides, and by the old senator who had urged change and reform – all this is gone. The auction of the empire, one of the most degrading episodes in Roman history, proceeds (although it did not occur on the death of Commodus). This Rome is a lost cause no longer worth fighting for. Viewers understand what Edward Gibbon had made evident in the monumental work that inspired this film, that the decline and fall of Rome was something that affected all of mankind and still affects us today. (Cf. on this Chapter Eight.) *The Fall of the Roman Empire* communicates to attentive audiences Gibbon’s melancholia over the loss of culture and civilization and a descent into new tyranny, wars, and barbarism. The film’s mournful music over the final credits – THE END in a dual sense – reinforces the mood the film leaves us with.

3. Musical Score and Plot: Private and Public

Dimitri Tiomkin’s score exemplifies what a film scholar has observed about the scores of historical epics: “The Hollywood epic also defines History as occurring to music – pervasive symphonic music underscoring every moment by overscoring it.”²⁹ The score of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* distracts from the film’s overall quality. A case in point is the first spectacular sequence in which we see the splendor and greatness of Rome, Commodus’ triumphal entry into the city. First-time viewers may be so overwhelmed by what they are watching on the screen as to pay scant attention to what they are hearing. For repeat viewers the images will retain their attraction, but the music accompanying them is likely to grow obtrusive or irritating. Tiomkin was well within his creative rights when he decided to “dismiss all idea[s] of giving this picture quasi

²⁹ Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’” 25. There are exceptions. The scores composed by Miklós Rózsa for Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* and for *El Cid* are exemplary.

documentary-style music” and to “react spontaneously to the dramatic element which I gradually began to see and appreciate” in the film. “I . . . found myself . . ., to my great surprise, involved with . . . characters whose problems were remarkably like our own and practically coincidental with all human drama.”³⁰ These words may explain both the appeal of the film’s subject to Tiomkin and the excesses of his score.

There is, however, one important exception, the main theme. It serves a dual function, representing what we might call the film’s public subject as expressed in its title and plot and the private theme of the romance between Livius and Lucilla. The main theme recurs frequently in the course of the film and is most often associated with the emotions and fate of the lovers. A simple and easily remembered phrase, the theme “has an eloquence and sweep wholly appropriate to the large-scale setting” and movingly expresses, at different moments, “the overall theme of decline.” It is the first musical phrase we hear after the overture (which is frequently omitted from screenings) and during the opening credit sequence. It rises in an epic crescendo under the film’s title card. Since we do not yet know anything about the story that is to follow, we identify the theme with Rome. But “its apparent romantic associations” make it equally suitable for the love theme. As a result we are nudged emotionally to respond to romance and history in equal measure. But the theme warns us from the very beginning that we are about to witness an unusual story, for it conveys “a funereal ambience for the empire.”³¹ The music tells us the meaning of the film’s story: “the essential theme of failure that colors *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.”³² Tiomkin’s theme sounds a dirge for the loss of Rome. So does the whole film.

The payoff comes at the end. After the narrator’s closing words tell us about a civilization destroying itself as the auction of the empire is in full swing, the musical theme majestically and in stately measures rises on the soundtrack for the last time. Now it accompanies our last view of the Forum and of a sky obscured by smoke, then continues over a drawing

³⁰ The quotations are taken from “A Letter to Listeners,” Tiomkin’s text for the soundtrack album of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Tiomkin reports that he composed about two and a half hours worth of music. The album also states that he conducted an orchestra of 110 musicians. On his score cf. William Darby and Jack Du Bois, *American Film Music: Major Composers, Techniques, Trends, 1915–1990* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1990), 257–263. On musical scores for films set in antiquity cf. the overview by Jon Solomon, “The Sounds of Cinematic Antiquity,” in Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, 319–337.

³¹ Darby and Du Bois, *American Film Music*, 263 and 258.

³² The preceding three quotations are from Darby and Du Bois, *American Film Music*, 261, 257, and 262.

of ruins surrounding the words THE END. (Cf. my discussion in Chapter Eight.) The fall of Rome has barely begun, but the loss is already being conceived as complete. And this ending may have made contemporary audiences think and feel about their own moment in history. Even if the West had recovered from the barbarities of two world wars, the early 1960s was still a time of precariousness and anxiety over the Cold War and a nuclear arms race, soon to be followed by student unrest, Vietnam, Watergate, and much beyond.³³ For viewers attuned to the emotional pull of romance and melodrama, here coupled to their sense of spectacular visual beauty and historical understanding, the effect can be overwhelming. In such emotional involvement may actually lie the ultimate cause for the film's financial failure at the box office far more than in the public's often postulated satiety with "sword and sandal movies." Those who had gone to see *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in the expectation of watching another uplifting story had their expectations thwarted and may have warned others off this film: No happy ending!

The film's end title closes what had begun with the title card, whose thematic importance is commonly overlooked. Side by side with male and female figures drawn in the style of ancient graffiti we can read two Latin phrases on either side of the screen. On the lower right, also in graffiti-style, is VOX POPULI and under it, in smaller letters, VOX DEI: "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Although it is a proverbial Christian saying, it fits the film's pagan context.³⁴ The saying is by Peter of Blois, the twelfth-century poet, diplomat, and Latin secretary to King Henry II, to Eleanor of Aquitaine, and to several archbishops of Canterbury. It was addressed to the clergy and exhorted them to heed their congregations' judgment of them. Its roots are ancient, both biblical and pagan.³⁵ In the film it contrasts with the people's obliviousness to Commodus' ruinous policies, just as it emphasizes his disregard of the people. In the film's first half the voice of Marcus Aurelius had addressed the empire's leaders but had really expressed his concerns for the people: VOX MARCI, VOX

³³ On this cf. Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁴ This, too, sets the film apart from other epics. As Mann said in his essay: "Those films gave the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about, but it was a minor incident in the greatness of the Roman Empire." Still, Christianity does briefly appear. The title card shows a fish in the familiar style ancient and modern Christians use as their symbol. Timonides will eventually convert; he wears a *chirho* pendant when Livius and Lucilla find his dead body. Tiomkin introduces the film's main theme with a solo organ, an instrument chiefly associated with church music.

³⁵ Cf. Isaiah 66.6 (Latin version); Seneca the Elder, *Controversies* 1.1.10 ("Believe me, the people's tongue is sacred"; my translation); Hesiod, *Works and Days* 763–764.

POPVLI, we might say. More important, however, is what we read on the title card's center left: PAX ROMANA above the head of an emperor drawn in a manner copied from third- or fourth-century Roman artists. The two words are also written like graffiti. But they have been crossed out with a sweeping white line. (Chalk may be implied.) The whole thrust of the film is hereby announced visually, the ideal – the Roman peace – and its destruction. Rarely do epic films open so subtly.³⁶

The public and the private, the personal and the political, the detail and the panorama – all these encompass the range of historical fiction in image and text and of historical scholarship. Tiomkin's theme and the entire film illustrate this conjunction of micro and macro history, as cultural and film historian Siegfried Kracauer calls it. What Kracauer says about the affinities between historiography and cinema is worth our attention. He observes:

discerning historians aspiring to history in its fullness favor an interpenetration of macro and micro history . . . [Historian Herbert] Butterfield . . . believes that the ideal kind of history would perhaps be "structure and narrative combined," – a history which is both, "a story and a study."

This is in striking analogy with film: the big must be looked at from different distances to be understood; its analysis and interpretation involve a constant movement between the levels of generality . . . [In cinema] the big can be adequately rendered only by a permanent movement from the whole to some detail, then back to the whole, etc. The same holds true for history . . . In consequence, the historian must be in a position freely to move between the macro and micro dimensions.³⁷

³⁶ Or continue that way. In the film's second half Timonides, come to Rome together with some of the now peaceful Germans, is addressing the Roman people outside the city gate: "What we have done here could be done the whole world over." As he is speaking, a kind of shrine or small temple screen left is displaying a three-line inscription: INVENI PORTVM / SPES ET FORTVNA / VALETE. This is part of the Latin equivalent, existing in different translations, of an epigram in the *Greek Anthology* (*Anthologia Palatina* 9.49). In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton translates: "Mine haven's found, fortune and hope adieu. / Mock others now, for I have done with you." He falsely attributes the Latin to Prudentius. The motto also appears in Casanova's *Memoirs*, Lesage's *Gil Blas*, on the tomb of the sixteenth-century Florentine Francesco Pucci in Rome (the source for Moore and Colasanti?), and in several other contexts.

³⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121–122 (in chapter entitled "The Structure of the Historical Universe"). His quotations are from Herbert Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 205. Kracauer, *History*, 122, quotes a vivid example of how to combine micro and macro from Russian filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin about a political demonstration. See further Kracauer, *History*, 181–182.

The Fall of the Roman Empire combines the public – characters from history – with the private – invented characters interacting with historical figures. So it is not a work of history. It combines fact and fiction to create a feeling of history by adhering to what have been the main characteristics of historical fiction since the novels of Sir Walter Scott. A modern scholar has listed the main features of Scott's historical novels according to the following categories:

Subject matter: "Scott normally represented an earlier stage of society as divided against itself, with that past conflict itself typically defined as a struggle between older and newer centers of power, and usually leading to a social resolution, but often at great human cost."

Documentation: Providing extensive source references, "Scott . . . offered his novels as a record of former manners and struggles."

Manners: "His prefaces stress that the great challenge facing the historical novelist is to make past manners live for modern readers without either leaving them unintelligible for the sake of fidelity or creating anachronism for the sake of making them intelligible."

Plot: Scott "would set a local or domestic action, in which the intimate manners of the culture could be displayed, against the background of a larger historical development. This arrangement allows for . . . the strictly factual and the more broadly typical historical representations . . . as well as between official or public or political history, on the one hand, and unofficial or private or popular history on the other."

Characterization: "Virtually all of his novels are populated with actual historical personages . . . However . . . these kinds of figures are not the protagonists of the historical novel . . . the protagonist at center stage is a relatively mediocre character who is caught between . . . two factions whose conflict . . . defines his character."³⁸

With the partial exception of the second item, Scott's procedure is exemplified in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and in *Gladiator*, its epigone. As the scholar just quoted reminds us: "The French once developed a term for license-taking in historical representation that is a very close equivalent to what we mean when we speak of history gone Hollywood: they called it *histoire Walter Scottée*" – Scottified history.³⁹

³⁸ James Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," in Gene W. Ruoff (ed.), *The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 237–273; quotations at 244–245.

³⁹ Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," 268. I return to this valuable study and to Scott in Chapter Nine.

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Livius' failure to counteract the failure of Marcus Aurelius, who did not soon enough ensure the succession of a suitable emperor, means the failure of Rome. The failure of Rome is the failure of civilization. The failure of the film at the box office is, however, not a sign of its artistic failure. As mentioned, a story of loss and defeat that stands apart from more common stories either of victory over evil empires and tyrants or of moral or spiritual vindication cannot have been appealing to the masses. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was no *Quo Vadis* and no *Ben-Hur*. It was not meant to be. As director Mann explicitly put it: "I did not want to make another *Quo Vadis*? . . . another *Spartacus* or any of the others."⁴⁰

4. Epic Style: The Final Duel

Since Homer's *Iliad*, the earliest epic in Western literature, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the greatest and most influential Roman epic, stories about mythical or historical heroes have tended to end in the protagonist's "show-down" with his enemy, the story's climax. That of Livius and Commodus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* illustrates how a scene required by plot convention can heighten our involvement to such a degree that the end itself becomes extremely poignant. We can best appreciate the visual qualities of this duel, the choreography of its action and stunts, and its high degree of stylization if we contrast it with its equivalent in *Gladiator*.

Ridley Scott, as we expect, stages the fight between Maximus and Commodus in the Colosseum. Anthony Mann, as we might not expect, places Livius and Commodus in the middle of the Roman Forum. Maximus and Commodus are armed with swords. They wildly swing away at each other. Their fight is interrupted when Commodus, by now swordless, calls to the Praetorian Prefect for a new weapon. But his command is futile. Commodus then pulls a hidden dagger from his sleeve and attacks Maximus, who is also unarmed and already near death. This treachery calls forth Maximus' last reserves of strength. Their duel now turns more brutal because they have to fight at closer range. Maximus uses his elbow, fists, and knee to pummel Commodus until he can push the villain's own dagger through Commodus' neck.

⁴⁰ In "Empire Demolition," a short essay about *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reprinted in the present book.

The action of this duel is simple: the two fighters rely only on brute force, not on any strategy. Scott has to resort to other ways to ensure that his spectators are thrilled, those in the theater more than those in the Colosseum. So he bombards our senses with a variety of standard film tricks. The whooshing sounds of the swords as they cut through the air and the clashing of their blades are amplified on the soundtrack. Also amplified is the wild cheering of the spectators. Then slow motion and, most of all, rapid editing provide the spectacle. Finally, and in extreme close-ups, Maximus forces the dagger into Commodus' neck, with the sound pumped up yet again. Coming from a director with a reputation for action and atmosphere, the duel in *Gladiator* is disappointing. It has been staged perfunctorily and then jazzed up artificially. It takes less than two minutes and forty-five seconds. Considered as an epic climax or as an action scene it is a failure, not least because it follows on far bigger and more spectacular action sequences: the gigantic opening battle, several arena fights, and especially the Battle of Carthage. A film critic comments:

In "Gladiator," Ridley Scott thrusts us so close to the combat that all we see is a lot of whirling and thrashing, a sword thrust here and there, a spurt of blood, a limb severed. There's hardly a scene that is cleanly and coherently staged in open space. The violence comes mainly from the editing, in the cheapening use of montage. We see this sort of flamboyant mess all the time in the movies, but almost no one complains – perhaps because we have become so accustomed to spatially incoherent movement in commercials and on MTV that it now looks normal.⁴¹

What would the climax of *Gladiator* have looked like if Scott had not had advanced computer technology at his disposal? His first film, *The Duellists* (1977), puts *Gladiator* to shame, because there Scott rose to the occasion of telling a moving, even tragic, tale of heroic antagonists

⁴¹ David Denby, "Flesh and Blood," *The New Yorker* (May 15, 2000), 105. The verdict of another critic is even more devastating: "Regarding the atomized feel of the movie's action scenes, digital editing certainly isn't the only culprit. Scott . . . has roots in television and commercials, so he's perhaps predisposed toward an overreliance on close-ups and cutting. But practically none of *Gladiator's* combat scenes have any sense of spatial integrity or character-to-character physical dynamics. With every flurry of action accomplished via rapid-fire editing, staccato jump cuts, fast motion and sound effects, you often can't quite tell who's doing what to whom. Though the immediate impact may be dazzling, the impression that lingers is hollow and mechanical." Quoted from Godfrey Cheshire, "Fall of the Empire," *Independent Weekly* (Durham, North Carolina; May 3, 2000), at <http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A14312>.

in expressive settings, in a ravishing if somber visual style, and with gripping action.

By contrast, Mann and his team of collaborators, chief among them second-unit director Yakima Canutt, made things as tough and complex for their duelists as possible.⁴² Livius' and Commodus' fight over the fate of the empire is one of the most exciting and suspenseful duels in the history of epic cinema. A shot-by-shot analysis or a careful viewing in slow-motion on a DVD will yield a veritable lesson in how to stage, film, and edit an action sequence. Here I limit myself to a few observations.

Most noteworthy is Mann's elegant use of the gigantic cinema screen. The widescreen format that had previously captured the same setting in panoramic views is now tightened to a small arena. Praetorians mark off a rectangular space by forming a wall of shields around Livius and Commodus, two rows on top of each other. This completely isolates them from the crowd in the Forum and makes for a claustrophobic atmosphere. They are in a cage, and a major strategy for both will be to drive the opponent into a corner. In *Gladiator* Scott imitates Mann's staging without apparently fully understanding its point, for the Praetorian Guards that surround Maximus and Commodus in an oval that imitates the curvature of the Colosseum are spaced apart from each other. Their presence serves hardly any purpose except decoration. We can find a better demonstration of effective staging in a comparable sequence in the Chinese historical epic *Hero* (2002), in which one fast and furious duel takes place on a vast desert plain. Director Zhang Yimou surrounds the duelists by a tight formation of soldiers with shields.

In their cage Livius and Commodus are further isolated by total silence, for neither the people nor the men holding up their shields can see or react to their combat – the opposite of Scott's staging, who repeatedly cuts away to the spectators, mainly Lucilla. Mann's camera takes only us, the viewers, into the cage with Commodus and Livius; only we have privileged "seats." Mann also gives us an imaginative variety of neutral and point-of-view shots. These range from tight close-ups to medium shots and fast lateral camera movements that leave the shields

⁴² Yakima Canutt with Oliver Drake, *Stunt Man: The Autobiography of Yakima Canutt* (1979; rpt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 202–206, describes his work on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, mainly concerning its chariot race. Canutt had previously designed and co-directed the chariot race in *Ben-Hur* with Andrew Marton (cf. the next note) and directed the second unit on *El Cid*. His comments on the duel sequence in *El Cid* at Canutt, 195 and 200–202, indicate what his approach to staging the duel in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* may have been like.

in the background blurred. Although quick action demands quick cutting, the average length of Mann's shots exceed Scott's. Mann and Canutt have no need to dazzle us with their editing. They impress us with complicated and hair-raising stunts. Commodus and Livius are armed with javelins, a more versatile kind of weapon than swords that can be thrust and thrown. They allow for greater creativity in designing stunts and make for more thrilling action. An example is when Commodus hurls his javelin at a helpless Livius who is lying on the ground. It narrowly misses him because at the last moment Livius raises himself up a little, and the javelin strikes the ground and passes *under* his body and thuds into the shields in the background. In the total silence the sound effects are thrilling. Like Scott, Mann uses turned-up sound – the whoosh and clatter of spears flying and hitting either the stones of the Forum floor or the wall of shields is highly effective. But none of this is jarring since it sounds realistic. Everything we see did take place; nothing is faked or computerized. (Experienced stuntmen of course stand in for the actors at the most dangerous moments.) Although the outcome is predictable, the climax comes as a surprise. A charging Commodus accidentally impales himself on Livius' weapon in a kind of final embrace of his former friend. Their duel has lasted only about forty-five seconds longer than the one in *Gladiator*, but it feels longer because it is more intense. It involves us more. As Mann described it:

I finally surrounded the action with shields and made a small arena – an intimate arena where two men would fight to the end – so that the whole of the enormous Forum set could now be forgotten and you were only interested in what was behind the shields.⁴³

Mann emphasizes the fighters' isolation most effectively by including several high-angle shots of their arena, as if an implacable god or gods were looking down on puny humans. This is a well-established ancient perspective, for in the *Iliad* Zeus looks down on the battle of the Greeks

⁴³ Quoted from J. H. Fenwick and Jonathan Green-Armytage, "Now You See It: Landscape and Anthony Mann," *Sight and Sound*, 34 no. 4 (1965), 186–189, at 187. Contrast with this the gigantic battle of the Roman and Persian armies, in which we see only an anonymous mass of combatants without becoming emotionally stirred. The battle sequence, which Mann did not direct, works as spectacle but falls well below Mann's conception: "I'd designed my shots . . . but the money ran out. Samuel Bronston made Andrew Marton direct it when I was in Rome. Nothing remains of the original project." Quoted from Jean-Claude Missiaen, "A Lesson in Cinema," tr. Donald Phelps, *Cahiers du cinéma in English*, 12 (1967), 44–51, at 50. Marton's recollection is somewhat different from Mann's; cf. his words in D'Antonio, *Andrew Marton*, 423–424.

and Trojans from a high mountain.⁴⁴ Intelligent use of screen space, especially in widescreen format, is a hallmark of Mann's style. A film scholar regards it as a visual expression of underlying tensions between or among characters: "Mann was . . . an artist of spatial relationships. The visible distance between people in his films was their relationship. It did not *express* it. It *was* it."⁴⁵ The same critic notes about Mann's earlier films, especially *El Cid*, his first fictive-historical epic, that Mann possessed an "abiding interest in the strains put upon the man of honor and the way that he vindicates himself through trial of arms," that "no other director could so [clearly] elucidate violence," and that often "violence must be total if it is to succeed, and . . . its success is destructive of the man who resorts to it."⁴⁶ All this is true for *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mann explained his action philosophy, as we may call it, in his essay on the film:

one must be careful not to let the concept of the spectacular run away with you. . . . the spectacle [in this film] is done entirely differently to what you would expect . . . the characters bring you into the spectacle rather than it being imposed on you without dramatic reason.

The action climax required for epic narratives should transcend mere spectacle. Here it does. It is exactly the right preparation, thematically and stylistically, for what will follow, Livius' renunciation of Rome and the auction of the empire. Viewers who have been drawn into the film intellectually and who have thrilled to its climactic duel now respond emotionally to its ending. We leave the theater with a sense of regret for the doom of Rome. No other film achieves this. But how could a director who had never before completed a film about antiquity get such results?

5. Anthony Mann's Road to Epic

If we consider *The Fall of the Roman Empire* within Mann's complete body of work we can better understand why this film is such a different Roman

⁴⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 8.41–52. On the cinematic analogy of this moment cf. my comments in "The *Iliad* and the Cinema," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 43–67, at 51, and in "Greek Myth on the Screen," in Roger D. Woodard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 453–479, at 458.

⁴⁵ David Thomson, *America in the Dark: The Impact of Hollywood Films on American Culture* (New York: Morrow, 1977), 28–29.

⁴⁶ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 559, in entry on Mann (558–559).

epic. Mann seems to have been interested in European culture and literature from an early age. In the words of one of his daughters:

Though it is true my father only finished the eighth grade in school in New Jersey, he had received the major part of his education at the Theosophical Society in Point Loma, California, where he was exposed to in-depth learning about the classics, dramas and writings of ancient times. The Society would put on elaborate productions in their open-air Greek amphitheater, the first in the US. He was an avid reader, as was his highly educated mother, and was deeply attracted to and appreciative of history in particular.

Mann had a “long-standing love of all themes classical as well as Shakespearean.”⁴⁷ Certain thematic connections to archetypal elements in classical tragedy and epic may be traced throughout Mann’s career.⁴⁸

After early experiences in New York theater Mann began working in Hollywood in 1938 and started directing in 1942. He was initially restricted to “B movies,” made under difficult circumstances with extremely limited budgets and on tight shooting schedules. He had to rely on his ingenuity and versatility even to finish such films, much less to deliver a decent product. It is to his credit that part of this work has gained considerable critical recognition. Mann worked mainly in *film noir*, a genre strongly influenced stylistically by German Expressionist cinema and characterized thematically by dark tales of corruption and doom set in the urban jungle.⁴⁹ A pitiless fate causes crimes, betrayals

⁴⁷ The quotations are from an e-mail communication to me from Nina Mann (February 25, 2008). In a 2008 interview included in the Criterion Collection DVD edition of Mann’s *The Furies* she specifies that the plays produced were “the Greek classics as well as Shakespearean plays” and that Mann was strongly influenced by them for the staging of his films. Cf. below on Mann’s interest in *King Lear*.

⁴⁸ A full-scale biography incorporating in-depth analysis of Mann’s work does not exist. On Mann and his work see Jean-Claude Missiaen, *Anthony Mann* (Paris: Editions universitaires, 1964); Alberto Morsiani, *Anthony Mann* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1983; rpt. 1986); Philip Kemp, “Mann, Anthony,” in John Wakeman (ed.), *World Film Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: Wilson, 1987), 723–731; Fernando Alonso, *Anthony Mann* (Barcelona: Filmideal, 1997); Ángel Comas, *Anthony Mann* (Madrid: T and B Editores, 2004); and Jeanine Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007). – I omit discussion of the less important films Mann directed, although *Men in War* (1957), set in Korea, is a gritty examination of heroism, cowardice, and the strains of combat – in it, “Mann aimed for the universality of legend” (Kemp, 728) – and *God’s Little Acre* (1958) was a personal favorite of his.

⁴⁹ Literature on Expressionist cinema and *film noir* is extensive. I here mention only the fundamental studies by Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, tr. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; rpt. 2008), and Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* (New York: Viking,

by close friends or lovers, suffering, revenge, and frequently the protagonist's death. Happy endings may occur but tend to be ambivalent. The titles of Mann's most highly regarded films from 1946 to 1948 guide us to their content: *Strange Impersonation*, *Desperate*, *Railroaded*, *Raw Deal*, and *He Walked by Night* (credited to a different director but largely Mann's). Especially noteworthy is the little-known *Side Street* (1949), whose opening images – bird's-eye views of the canyons of lower Manhattan, shot at a vertical angle – impart a sense of doom to the story from its very beginning, as if we were looking down on the pointless existence of insignificant humans. By contrast, the similar shots in color and wide-screen that open Robert Wise's and Jerome Robbins's *West Side Story* (1961) are mere pictorialism. (Since the same studio produced both films, it is possible that Wise here imitated Mann.) More important for our context, however, is *Reign of Terror* (1949), Mann's first historical drama. Set during the French Revolution, its style is that of *film noir* while its plot carries strong contemporary overtones. It draws a "parallel between the political factions of the time [1794] and rival [American] gangster mobs . . . emphasizing the common atmosphere of violence, intrigue, and passion, the neurotic hunger that drove both Revolutionary leaders and Prohibition mobsters."⁵⁰ As *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows on the largest scale, the past is best understood from the perspective of the present.

The second phase in Mann's work began in 1950, when he made a seamless transition to the Western, the genre of his greatest achievements. His early Westerns continue the style of *film noir*, but Mann's themes are now deepened.⁵¹ The Western is at the same time a quintessential American film genre and an archetypal narrative of worldwide appeal.⁵² Director Sam Peckinpah once defined the Western as "a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today."⁵³ The

1972). In "Action Speaks Louder than Words: The Films of Anthony Mann," a 1967 BBC interview now available in excerpts on the DVD of *The Furies*, Mann names German director F. W. Murnau as one of his influences.

⁵⁰ Quoted from Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "Anthony Mann," in Jean-Pierre Coursodon and Pierre Sauvage (eds.), *American Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 237–243, at 239.

⁵¹ On the stylistic affinities of Mann's *film noir* to his early Westerns see Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 71–79.

⁵² Cf. André Bazin, "The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence," in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; rpt. 2005), vol. 2, 140–148.

⁵³ Quoted from Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 362.

Western finds close analogies in Greek epic and tragedy, the two foremost classical literary genres based on myth, and in medieval literature.⁵⁴ As Mann put it in a 1967 interview:

You can take any of the great dramas – [it] doesn't matter whether it's Shakespeare [or] Greek plays or what – you can always lay them in the West, and they somehow become alive, and this kind of passion and this *drama* – you can have patricide, any kind of –cide . . . in a Western, and you can get away with it because it is . . . where all action took place.⁵⁵

Devil's Doorway and *The Furies* (both 1950), Mann's first two Westerns, are named after places, but their titles carry symbolic meaning. The former is the tragic story of an American Indian chief, a highly decorated hero of the Civil War. Returning after the war, he is confronted with racial prejudices. He is dispossessed of his farm, since only US citizens are allowed to own land. The film addresses a fundamental problem of American race relations. The United States may be a melting pot, but the original population was largely excluded, even killed off. What the wise old senator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* advises regarding the Germans was not the case in American history or in *Devil's Doorway* regarding the Indians: "let us take them among us." But even in death the hero fights for his people and his cause. *The Furies* is much darker and reminiscent of Greek myth and tragedy in the complicated entanglements of its main characters. A self-destructive love-hate relationship between a powerful patriarchal rancher and his strong-willed daughter borders on the incestuous. She has an Electra Complex but eventually engages in a kind of conspiracy against him. At the film's end the father is dead.

Mann's next film, *Winchester '73*, made the same year, continues the theme of family violence but links it with one of the fundamental narrative motifs of classical and medieval heroic epic and of the Western genre,

⁵⁴ I examine thematic links between ancient myth and literature on the one hand and the Western on the other in "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22 (1985), 516–540. For a demonstration of how classical epic and tragedy may both characterize a particular film cf. my "Homer's *Iliad* and John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (eds.), *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 145–170, and "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, 118–147. On medieval myth and the Western cf. my "Mythologische Motive im amerikanischen Western-Film," in Jürgen Kühnel et al. (eds.), *Mittelalter-Rezeption III: Mittelalter, Massenmedien, Neue Mythen* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988), 563–578, and, more specifically, "Fritz Lang's Epic Medievalism: From *Die Nibelungen* to the American West," *Mosaic*, 36 no. 1 (2003), 135–146.

⁵⁵ Quoted from "Action Speaks Louder than Words."

that of a dangerous journey. His quest for revenge on his evil brother, who had killed their father, drives the protagonist to near-madness – shades of Orestes. The film mixes the positive (heroic deeds and fearlessness) and the negative (the hero's obsession). In Mann's own words: "He was a man who could kill his own brother, so he was not really a hero" in the conventional sense.⁵⁶ The film also points ahead to the different outlook of Mann's two epics: first an admiring affirmation of a heroic individual's achievements in *El Cid*, then the pessimism of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. *Bend of the River* (1952) features a protagonist torn between heroism and an innate streak of violence and the friendship between two men who turn into enemies. At the center of *The Naked Spur* (1953), Mann's darkest Western and one of his masterpieces, is the moral ambiguity of its protagonist, a bounty hunter. The film restates the Homeric theme of first denying and then allowing burial of a corpse. Just as in the *Iliad* Achilles overcomes his hatred for dead Hector and wins his greatest victory – over himself – so Mann's protagonist conquers his baser nature after his obsession has driven him to inhumanity.⁵⁷ If John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) is the most profound and Homeric of all Westerns, *The Naked Spur* is not far behind.⁵⁸

Ambivalence about society and civilization continues in *The Far Country* (1954), in which the representative of law and order is a corrupt hanging judge. The presentation of geometric formality in Mann's shots of an army fort on the border in *The Last Frontier* (1955) is later paralleled by that of the Roman border fortress in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The ending of *The Tin Star* (1957), whose hero is again an ambivalent figure (another bounty hunter), foreshadows that of Mann's Roman epic, for the protagonist turns his back on a society he despises. "*The Tin Star* demonstrates how the community brings about the death of its very

⁵⁶ Quoted from "Action Speaks Louder Than Words."

⁵⁷ Cf. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 142: "the revenge taken by the [principal] character is exacted upon himself, a punishment the inner meaning of which is a denial of reason and humanity. In general, all of Mann's heroes behave as if driven by a vengeance they must inflict upon themselves for having once been human, trusting and, therefore, vulnerable." This applies to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, if not in a form quite as pure. Kitses's book contains the fundamental study of Mann's Westerns; its original publication as *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson / British Film Institute, 1969) was the first extensive thematic appreciation of the body of Mann's work. The older book is still valuable for the clarity of analysis and expression sometimes missing from the later version.

⁵⁸ Mann himself named Ford as his greatest model; cf. Missiaen, *Anthony Mann*, 8, with source reference.

soul . . . by denying the existence of evil that its own attitude creates."⁵⁹

Two other films are of even greater significance, *The Man from Laramie* (1955) and *Man of the West* (1958). Their titles indicate that Mann was moving toward archetypal aspects of myth and approaching pure epic. They tell us that the character referred to is a hero but say nothing specific about plot or settings. The man from Laramie might as well have come from anywhere else. He is searching for the killer or killers of his brother but runs afoul of the young and irresponsible son of the owner of a huge cattle kingdom. The hard-working foreman is almost another son to the owner but turns out to be corrupt. He feels slighted and exploited by the old man; eventually he kills the son and almost brings about the father's death. He is finally confronted by the hero, whose brother's death he had indirectly caused, and meets his own death. The hero rides off.

Reminiscences of classical tragedy are particularly strong in this film. The old rancher is going blind; while he can see he knows nothing about the evil that is surrounding him. Only when he is blind does he gain insight – echoes of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The old man has had a recurring dream in which someone kills his son, and at first he mistakes the protagonist for this mysterious assassin. His dream will be fulfilled, but not by the man he suspects. It is regrettable that the screenplay did not turn the protagonist and the foreman into the old rancher's sons. If it had we would be watching a modern version of the kind of family tragedy familiar from the myths about the descendants of Tantalus and from the works of the Athenian dramatists. But we can also observe parallels to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. A father has achieved a great "empire" but is saddled with a worthless son. The old patriarch fails to ensure a smooth succession in his realm and is done in by a conspiracy carried out in his closest circle. His dissolute son is killed by the very friend who for many years has lived with him like a brother. This friend has long been an upright character who is used to undoing the damage caused by the son. But he becomes corrupt through greed and a feeling of near-Oedipal rejection by a father figure. At the end the two obvious heirs of the cattle empire are dead. Although it will continue to exist, the ranch and its greatness are lost. Whereas it has never been "conquered from without" – it grew through its owner's fights against Indians and by his treaties and business transactions – "it has destroyed itself from within," to quote the final words of the narrator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

⁵⁹ Quoted from Kitses, *Horizons West*, 157.

The screenplay of *The Man from Laramie* was written by Philip Yordan, a writer who had worked with Mann on several films since *Reign of Terror*. Mann and Yordan collaborated for the last time on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.⁶⁰ Apparently they shared thematic interests. What Yordan once said about his approach to heroic narratives is fully applicable to Mann's Westerns and epics. With his hero figures, Yordan said, he attempted to

find again the purities of heroes of ancient tragedies, of Greek tragedies, and on this I was in perfect agreement with Anthony Mann. I wanted to re-create a tragic mythology by assigning a large role to Destiny, to Solitude, to Nobility. A man arrives, coming from nobody knows where, going to nobody knows where, or one who is torn apart by the Furies and who is desperately seeking an inner peace.⁶¹

This purity of myth is the hallmark of *Man of the West*. The fact that it was *not* written by Yordan tells us that the writer's assessment of his closeness to the director was accurate. Coming near the end of the classic Hollywood Western, *Man of the West* is as appropriate an elegy to the genre as Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was to be three years later. The plot takes the form of a journey both geographic and symbolic. The hero has been sent to bring a schoolteacher, a traditional symbol of civilization, to New Hope, his hometown, but he comes face to face with his violent past. He is forced into a reunion with the brutish outlaw gang

⁶⁰ Yordan is one of the most enigmatic of Hollywood professionals. He served as front for several blacklisted screenwriters, whom he seems to have supported by giving them work and exploited by keeping a large share of credit and profit. See Pat McGilligan (ed.), *Backstory 2: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; rpt. 1997), 330–381 (chapter called "Philip Yordan: The Chameleon"). Yordan held Mann in high esteem; cf. Bertrand Tavernier, "Rencontre avec Philip Yordan," *Cahiers du cinéma*, 128 (February 1962), 14–24, at 18–20. Yordan considered Mann to have had little education (Yordan at McGilligan, 356), a charge Mann's daughter specifically repudiates in her message to me from which I have quoted above. Mann and Yordan had founded their own production company in 1956. Yordan seems to have been instrumental in bringing Mann to Bronston. Yordan received principal credit for writing *El Cid*, whose chief screenwriter was blacklisted Ben Barzman, and co-credit on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

⁶¹ Quoted, in my translation, from Tavernier, "Rencontre avec Philip Yordan," 19–20. Borden Chase, besides Yordan Mann's most important screenwriter, had comparable views about hero figures. *Red River* (1948), the epic Western Chase wrote for director Howard Hawks, is a story about the origin and growth of a gigantic cattle empire, a crisis at the stage of its greatest extent, and the problems involved in the succession from father to adopted son.

to which he had belonged many years ago. Their leader is a perverted father figure and had once taken the protagonist under his wing. The latter eventually kills the former. New Hope never appears on the screen. And the supposedly thriving and wealthy town whose bank the outlaw gang plans to rob turns out to be nothing but ruins: a ghost town in the middle of a desert. Civilization is lost sight of. The two films by Mann and Ford “mark the end of the classical Western, summing up and laying to rest its central concern with the taming of the wilderness in the interests of the growth of civilization.”⁶² The casting of Gary Cooper in the title part of *Man of the West* reinforces the film’s theme. Cooper was an incarnation of the traditional Western. At the time of filming he was already marked by terminal illness.

Family drama leading to tragic entanglements, violence, death, and moral ambiguity recur throughout Mann’s Westerns and epics. The strongly Oedipal nature of the Western is evident in several of Mann’s films.⁶³ It comes to the fore again in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Most of what Mann once said about Commodus is already shown in *The Man from Laramie*:

he tries to kill his father’s image, because this image is greater than his own. This is the story underneath the Oedipus drama. I don’t know of any great man who ever had a great son. This must have been a terrible thing for the son – to live with the image of his father, for although this is a love-image, it can also be a hate-image. This theme is recurrent, because it is a very strong one . . . it reaches to heights and depths beyond more mundane stories.⁶⁴

Thematic coherence and “a clarity of purpose” pervade Mann’s entire career.⁶⁵ He is highly regarded for his visual style. Mann possessed a “flawless command of . . . landscape photography,” especially in wide-screen compositions; his work “has to be witnessed – on a big screen –

⁶² Quoted from Robin Wood, “Man(n) of the West(ern),” *CineAction*, 46 (1998), 26–33, at 27. The title of Wood’s article, the best interpretation of *Man of the West*, is glib stylistically, but its meaning is right on target.

⁶³ On this cf. my *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo’s New Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122–153 (chapter entitled “The Complexities of Oedipus”), with comments on the Western at 132–134.

⁶⁴ Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” *Screen* 10 no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 42.

⁶⁵ The quotation is by Nina Mann in the interview on the DVD of *The Furies*.

before understanding can begin . . . No one has ever matched that feeling for heroic openness."⁶⁶

Epics were therefore the logical next step for Mann, and he worked on two such films with unhappy results to himself. Mann prepared and started the filming of *Spartacus*, but Kirk Douglas, its producer and star, replaced him with Stanley Kubrick.⁶⁷ *Cimmaron* (1960) is a heroic story that spans a quarter century from the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 to World War I. But *Cimmaron* was as good as destroyed when the studio re-edited and partially re-filmed it with a different director.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Mann's journey to historical epic was now complete. He went to Europe and Samuel Bronston. A critic concludes: "Few directors could have moved to the epic with surer credentials than Anthony Mann."⁶⁹ His tales of tragic heroism now took place on the largest scale. "He had an unfailing flair for selecting exteriors that were not only adapted to the requirements of the script but [also] came across as the embodiment of the psychological and moral tensions in it."⁷⁰

El Cid, an almost perfect epic, best illustrates Mann's theme of heroism coupled with sacrifice and death.⁷¹ Specific analogies to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* exist as well. The *Cid* acquires an understanding

⁶⁶ The three quotations are from Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 559 and 558. André Bazin, "Beauty of a Western" (1956), tr. Liz Heron, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 165–168, speaks of Mann's "extraordinary use of CinemaScope" (167) in *The Man from Laramie*.

⁶⁷ On the complex production history of this film see Duncan L. Cooper, "Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus? Production, Censorship, and Reconstruction of Stanley Kubrick's Epic Film," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 14–55.

⁶⁸ Cf. Missiaen, *Anthony Mann*, 110–111. Mann repudiated the film, objecting strongly to the protagonist's unheroic fate. (He dies off screen.) Cf. Wicking and Pattison, "Interviews with Anthony Mann," 43, on Mann's original conception.

⁶⁹ Quoted from Kitses, *Horizons West*, 164. Morsiani, *Anthony Mann*, 91, verbatim, if in Italian, restates Kitses's words but without attribution. Cf. Kemp, "Mann, Anthony," 729: "As a director of epics he was clearly a natural."

⁷⁰ Quoted from Coursodon, "Anthony Mann," 241–242. This verdict applies directly to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, as its border fortress and the surrounding countryside illustrate.

⁷¹ On this film and its connections to Mann's earlier work see my "Mythical and Cinematic Traditions in Anthony Mann's *El Cid*," *Mosaic*, 26 no. 3 (1993), 89–111, and, slightly differently, "El Cid: Ein mittelalterlicher Heldenmythos im Film," in Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich (eds.), *Mittelaltermythen*, vol. 1: *Herrscher, Helden, Heilige* (St. Gall: UVK Fachverlag für Wissenschaft und Studium, 1996), 327–340. Some of my observations above on Mann's career are taken from these articles.

of other peoples comparable to that of Marcus Aurelius; he specifically repudiates what in analogy to “the Roman way” espoused by Commodus’ henchman in the senate we may here call “the Spanish way,” the brutal treatment of the Moors by the Christians. The Cid asks: “We’ve been killing them for years. What has it brought us – peace?” He wants, as it were, a *pax Hispanica*. When his soldiers unite with those of an emir with whom the Cid is allied, we see what temporarily happens in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* among Germans and Romans. As everyone is feasting and rejoicing, the Cid asks the emir: “How can anyone say this is wrong?” He receives a prophetic reply: “They will say so – on both sides.”⁷²

Mann was originally attracted by the ending, in which the Cid wins a decisive victory after his death, a reminiscence of *Devil’s Doorway*. Legend greatly appealed to Mann. As he once said about the Western: “It is legend – and legend makes the very best cinema. It excites the imagination more . . . legend is a concept of characters greater than life.”⁷³ So *El Cid* re-creates the past as epic-tragic myth: “The whole film has the feel of the Middle Ages about it, not the Middle Ages as *it was* but as the troubadours saw it.”⁷⁴ Thematic similarities between Mann’s two epic films are notable.⁷⁵ What a film scholar once wrote about the main character of *The Far Country* is true for the Cid and for Livius: “The plot of Mann’s film is the process by which the hero is forced to choose between personal comfort and social responsibility.”⁷⁶ But stylistic similarities are evident as well, for on *El Cid* Mann had the same set decorators, editor, and cinematographer as on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The comments on the latter film by director Martin Scorsese apply also to the former: it “has the poignant beauty of a lost art. *The Fall of the Roman*

⁷² Amusingly, the chapter of the film’s DVD edition (published by the same company which put out the DVD of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*) in which this ethnic, religious, and cultural harmony is achieved, is called “Bend of the River.” (The Cid and the emir meet on opposite river banks, then embrace in the middle.) Ironically, the actor who plays the enlightened and highly cultured emir will play one of Commodus’ hardliners. More ironically, Charlton Heston, who plays the Cid and who was Bronston’s and Mann’s first choice for Livius, became less tolerant later.

⁷³ Quoted from Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 43.

⁷⁴ Quoted from Jeffrey Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 109.

⁷⁵ As Mann said, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* “wasn’t completely a legend though it has a legendary quality.” Quoted from Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 43.

⁷⁶ Quoted from V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 150.

Empire offered a multilayered drama . . . Mann's sense of space and dramatic composition had never been more evident."⁷⁷

After *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Mann lived only long enough to finish one other film and to leave his final work to be completed by others. *The Heroes of Telemark* (1965) is set in World War II and based on actual fact.⁷⁸ *A Dandy in Aspic* (1968) is a Cold War spy thriller about a double agent on the trail of an enemy double agent. Together the two films represent a turning away from heroic myth to realism. Critics have regarded them as signs of decline or exhaustion in Mann after his two gigantic epics.⁷⁹ Did the fall of Samuel Bronston and his empire then also entail the artistic fall of Anthony Mann? A conclusive answer is impossible, but Mann's last films actually continue the thematic consistency of his work. With his epics he had reached the apex of heroic cinema. *El Cid* showed the greatest possible triumph (rescue of one's country), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the greatest possible defeat. The end of heroism necessitated the end of epic cinema, at least for Mann. *The Heroes of Telemark* then is a transitional work, a small-scale epic that marks a withdrawal from what came before. By contrast, *A Dandy in Aspic* returns Mann to his early work in *film noir*. But it is also an intensification of that work. The betrayal and corruption in the underworld of his *noir* films now pervades an entire society, a soulless and emotionless world. More important, however, is a film Mann did not live to make, a Western based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*.⁸⁰ Its protagonist was to be played by John Wayne, the actor who more even than Gary Cooper embodied the iconic qualities of the complex Western hero, mainly through his long association with John Ford. This film's significance – the dissolution of a kingdom and a family as a result of a good but old and exhausted ruler's failure over his succession – is immediately obvious. And the enthusiasm that Mann evinced in an interview filmed shortly before his unexpected death should warn us against hasty assumptions of his decline.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Quoted from Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (New York: Miramax Books / Hyperion, 1997), 90.

⁷⁸ On this film Mann was reunited with Kirk Douglas, who had dismissed him from *Spartacus*. According to Mann's widow, the two remained on friendly terms, and Douglas eventually had second thoughts about his decision. (Telephone conversation with Anna Mann; June 10, 2008.)

⁷⁹ Cf. Kitses, *Horizons West*, 165.

⁸⁰ On this project cf. Wood, "Man(n) of the West(ern)," 31.

⁸¹ This interview is "Action Speaks Louder than Words," referred to and quoted from above.

It remains for this chapter to address two other aspects of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first points to a number of weaknesses; the second amounts to a posthumous vindication of Anthony Mann's and Samuel Bronston's epic vision.

6. Pre-Release Cuts Made to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

The longer a film, the more easily it falls victim to cuts. This phenomenon dates back to such influential silent epics as Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) and D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), to name only two of many. According to various but rather vague sources, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* as originally filmed and edited appears to have been as much as forty minutes longer than the version now extant. The cuts have impaired the quality of the film's portrayal of some of its main figures, especially Commodus and Livius. But scenes between Livius and Lucilla, the death of Marcus Aurelius, acts of human sacrifice by the barbarians (whose result now appears only momentarily), and more extensive debates in the senate seem to have been lost. Many scenes were trimmed, presumably for reasons of length. Careful viewers will notice some jarring gaps or jumps in the story, as with the aftermath of a German ambush and the sudden appearance, in close-up, of Chief Ballomar shouting "Attack!" This attack takes place without the careful staging that would make it convincing. Although set in a rocky landscape and cave, it was filmed indoors on a soundstage, with an artificial sky briefly visible in the background. The contrast to the location filming of just a moment before is unaccountable in plot terms. A comparison with the earlier and highly atmospheric ambush of the Germans in a mysterious forest, one of the most elegant and suspenseful sequences, makes the second battle look even worse. It is doubtful that any of this was Mann's choice. In the second half the scenes involving the German settlers also seem to be cut extensively. And Livius travels to and from Rome and the East with greater facility and speed than is credible.

To indicate the nature of what may have been lost I turn to a few specific scenes that survive in a format not usually associated with films of the 1960s, although the kind of source I am about to adduce is today a regular marketing feature that goes back to the silent era. I am referring to what is now called a "novelization": a novel adapted from a film's screenplay as a "tie-in" accompanying its release. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* had such a novel, written by prolific pulp fiction professional

Harry Whittington.⁸² Nobody, not even the author, would mistake it for literature, but Whittington delivered an effective version of the film. There is no reason today for anyone to turn to this novel, were it not that it contains descriptions of material excised from the film. Apparently, as is often the case, Whittington worked from the screenplay (although the principal screenwriter was completely unaware of his involvement), from the film's pre-release version, or from both. Authors of tie-ins have to finish well before the final cut has been assembled so that novel and film can be released together.⁸³ The novel's divergences from the film that are not evident embellishments are therefore often revealing. Some of them indicate what the writer read or saw but what filmgoers were not to see.⁸⁴

The novel of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* differs from the book in some noteworthy ways. Here are a few examples. Christianity plays a considerably greater part, as when Marcus Aurelius muses on Christians and Jesus (31), Timonides instructs a young German woman named Xenia in Christian doctrine (97–103), and there is a Christian among the senators (217). Commodus' mistress Marcia, omitted in the film, is a Christian (176–177), just as she was said to have been in antiquity, and conspires against him (224). Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that Livius is not quite the faithful lover of Lucilla as the film shows him to be. The speech Timonides delivers to the senate in the film is given by Livius in the novel (125). The torture of Timonides occurs much later (187–192), and Commodus kills the gladiator Verulus not in the palace but outside, in the Forum (226). The giant hand of Sabazio in the film is a statue of the goddess Cybele in the novel, inside which Livius kills Commodus (232). The novel also indicates better than the film the duration of Commodus' rule, which corresponds to historical fact (cf. 135, 140), and it makes Didius Julianus, who bought the empire at auction, a prominent follower of Commodus. In the film he is the advocate of "the Roman way" of "strength" and "might" (cf. below) but remains anony-

⁸² Harry Whittington, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1964), a paperback original with a photo of the film's Roman Forum set on its cover. The cover and the title page read *Samuel Bronston's The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The back cover shows the film's main credits and photos of five of its stars. References to and quotations from the novel will be by parenthetical page number.

⁸³ Film philologists are familiar with a parallel phenomenon. A film's trailer may contain short but telling moments of scenes removed from or shortened in its release version or may show camera takes different from those used in the finished film.

⁸⁴ Whittington refers to the Praetorian Guard as Commodus' "national security police." Whittington's grasp of Latin is tenuous.

mous, although the cast list included in promotional materials identifies him as “Julianus.”

Some of Whittington’s pages close the gaps that now exist in the film’s narrative. The two most significant instances warrant a brief discussion, for they throw light on three of the major characters, Commodus and Livius on the one hand and the old senator who advocates change on the other. The reunion of Livius and Commodus early in the film occurs after Marcus Aurelius has informed his general that he is to be his successor; there is some unease in Livius as a result. The two retire to Commodus’ quarters in the border fortress, where they engage in a drinking contest. They talk on the stairs and then go up. Now there is an abrupt cut, and in a tight close-up Commodus is wrestling with a blond German woman, presumably a prisoner, and trying to force her to drink. She escapes and runs into a large hall, where a pensive Livius is sitting at a table. Commodus yells at the cowering woman: “I’m Caesar’s son; I could have you burned alive.” Here we have the first clue to Commodus’ innate brutality. He then turns to Livius, who reveals Marcus Aurelius’ decision about the succession. Commodus is stunned. He refers to the laughter of the gods, a kind of leitmotif to the film’s portrayal of him on the road to his eventual madness. The rift between the two friends has begun. Another German woman is present in the background. Commodus, trying to hide his disappointment and anger, offers the first woman to Livius: “She is for *you*. She thinks.” The other he forces to go upstairs with him; his intention is obvious. The scene dissolves over a close-up of Livius pensively looking after Commodus to a long shot of Lucilla, Livius’ beloved. The sudden cut mentioned above, the abrupt appearance of the two women about whom we know nothing, and Commodus’ jarring outburst to one of them violate all rules of traditional filmmaking. Jump cuts or lack of explanation must not endanger viewers’ understanding, least of all when the plot is still in its early stage. The unmotivated cut proves that what Mann, most careful of directors, had filmed was tampered with extensively.

Who are these women? Why does the actress who plays the more important one receive a screen credit? For an explanation we must turn to Whittington, for he tells us what happened (47–53). Before going inside, Livius and Commodus notice “two young blonde girls chained to stakes” in “the prisoners’ pit” (47). One of them is Xenia, a German princess; the other is her maid. Xenia’s name was changed for the film to Helva, as the cast list shows. But her part was cut so much that she is never called by any name. Their helplessness appeals to Commodus’ sadistic streak: “Something about the debased position of the two women,

bound and helpless, struck at Commodus . . . He seldom got enjoyment from ordinary pleasures any more" (47). Xenia calls on Wotan in defiance of the Romans, and Commodus orders the women to be brought to his quarters. There Xenia senses Commodus' sexual depravity. In conversation with Livius Commodus reveals his nihilism ("The Roman empire has no real meaning," 50) and his complete opposition to Marcus Aurelius' policies. He is against change and advocates brute force. As in the film he tries to compel the princess to drink ("she struck at him savagely") and threatens her with being "burned alive" (52). Commodus briefly contemplates the pleasures that might ensue from his sexual humiliation of her but then rejects her and leaves with her maid instead. There is no revelation yet about the succession. Xenia now waits for Livius to act. But "Livius did not touch her" (53). He is thinking of Lucilla and leaves without harming Xenia. She seems to feel some attraction for him, and later, when Livius has been separated from Lucilla for good, as it seems, the two of them will have an affair that at least on her part goes deeper than mere physicality (139–140, 143–144). Although she remains a minor character in the film, she appears in several sequences among the pacified Germans. At film's end she is seen being burned alive after all.

Some of what Whittington describes could never have made it onto the screen. The main reason for the studio's radical interference is obvious. The Spanish censors originally imposed a number of cuts on the pre-release version of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and restricted it to viewers above eighteen years of age, losing Samuel Bronston a large and crucial segment of his potential audience. Even Faustina, Marcus Aurelius' long-dead wife never seen on screen, caused raised eyebrows in Catholic Spain because she was an adulteress. Strangely enough, the brief sequence that opens the film's second half with Lucilla depositing the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius was also suspect. Many of the film's prints are missing this scene as a result. Fortunately Bronston had good connections to the Spanish government. He succeeded in convincing the censors of the film's "strictest morals" and "moral clarity" and in reversing the worst of their demands.⁸⁵

One important moral aspect of the film hinges on the debate in the Roman senate concerning the uses of power. Here the most intriguing figure is an elder statesman who reminisces about the great emperors who ruled before Commodus and advocates enlightened changes to ensure the survival of Rome. The senator is clearly an authority figure

⁸⁵ Details in García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 247–250; quotations at 250.

to whom we should listen. Dedicated filmgoers will have known this even before he says a single word, for they will have recognized Scottish actor Finlay Currie, one of the grand old men of epic cinema.⁸⁶ Currie was a familiar presence in films with classical or biblical settings. He could be seen as St. Peter in *Quo Vadis* and as Balthasar in Wyler's *Ben-Hur*; in the latter film he also read the opening narration. He played Jacob in Irving Rapper's *Joseph and His Brethren* (1960), but his part in Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* was minimal (and probably cut down). More to the point is his appearance as King David in King Vidor's *Solomon and Sheba* (1959). David is old and wise but mortally ill. He claims only a peaceful legacy for himself: "I leave but one monument to my name, the unity of Israel." Acting on a vision from God ("Only in peace can Israel be made great, not in strife"), David appoints Solomon, his younger son, as his successor over Adonijah, his irresponsible elder son and the expected – not least by himself – heir to the throne. David thus precipitates a great crisis. He provokes enmity between the brothers and Adonijah's betrayal of his country to Egypt. Adonijah invades Israel with the Egyptian army and usurps the throne. He forces a reluctant Solomon into a public duel to the death and is deservedly killed. Thematic analogies concerning justifiable and irresponsible uses of power and plot similarities to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are self-evident.

Currie's senator remains anonymous and appears in just one scene, giving only his speech. But why was such a prominent actor, whose name the opening credits had listed in tenth position, hired to play such a tiny part? The question has two answers. The actor's presence visually conveys the proper emphasis that his wise words warrant. Ancient Romans and modern classicists might invoke terms like *gravitas*, *dignitas*, or *auctoritas* to describe him. Secondly, his part as originally conceived was radically cut. Whittington gives us the evidence, because the old senator, named Caecina (as he is in the cast list), is considerably built up. Whittington introduces him as "frail, withered, almost lost in his toga, looking to be ninety, at least" (123); Currie, equally lost in *his* toga but not quite as frail, was about eighty-five.

⁸⁶ Here are historical epics not set in antiquity in which Currie had appeared before 1964: Arthur Kimmins's *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948), Henry Hathaway's *The Black Rose* and Jean Negulesco's *The Mudlark* (both 1950), Richard Thorpe's *Ivanhoe* (1952), Harold French's *Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue* (1953), Douglas Sirk's *Captain Lightfoot* (1955), Terence Young's *Zarak* (1956, set in India during the Raj), Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan* (1957), Alberto Lattuada's *The Tempest* (1958, set in the Russia of Catherine the Great), Robert Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1960, based on the novel by the other Robert Stevenson), and Michael Curtiz's *Francis of Assisi* (1961).

Whittington then describes him in ringing terms as he rises to address the senate (127):

From the rows of senators, the aged Caecina rose and stepped out to claim the floor. Heavy silence greeted him.

Caecina's voice rose pure and clear. This was a battleground he knew well, his memories going back to the struggles in these chambers during the reign of [Antoninus] Pius, and before. History of the thousand years of Rome was bright in his mind – the wrongs, the evils, the triumphs, the building, its past and its destiny.

Caecina delivers his speech, and the senate reacts appropriately (128): “One after another the senators rose to their feet, cheering the old statesman. For him there was an acclamation.” Livius is grateful. “The old man gestured tiredly, returning to his place.”

As his anonymous equivalent does in the film, this Caecina represents the link to the past, the Rome of Marcus Aurelius. Even his name is apt, for it carries a historical echo. During the last phase of the Roman Republic Aulus Caecina was close to Cicero and an adherent of Pompey. He denounced Julius Caesar and was banished. Caecina was a great orator and a learned philosopher. Some fragments of his writings survive, as does some of Cicero's correspondence with him.⁸⁷ Caecina's name was chosen, presumably by historical expert Basilio Franchina, for his anti-Caesarian – that is to say, anti-totalitarian – stance.

Cicero eventually fell victim to the proscriptions of Mark Antony and Octavian, the future emperor Augustus, in the wake of Caesar's assassination. And what happened to our Caecina? The film does not tell us, but Whittington and presumably the earlier cut bring him back at the moment of Rome's greatest abasement to the megalomania of Commodus. The senators slavishly beg his permission to rename Rome “the city of Commodus” and to call themselves “Commodian Body” (207). This happens in the film as well. In a vague echo of Juvenal's *Satire Four*, in which the servile council of tyrannical Emperor Domitian absurdly deliberates about a giant fish, Commodus next proposes a law that mullet be prepared only in the exact way he had himself eaten it the day before. This part is omitted from the film's release version. Livius now realizes that “the Roman senate had been perverted, debased, demoralized” (208). Commodus' Praetorians advance on him – but:

⁸⁷ Cf. Suetonius, *The Deified Caesar* 75.5, and Cicero, *Letters to His Friends* 6.5–9, 10.25.3, and 13.66. On the film's old senator see also my discussion in Chapter Eight.

They flinched, startled, when a voice rang out from the chamber, crackling like . . . [a] whip . . . the aged senator Caecina . . . had walked down to . . . the center of the forum [i.e. the senate floor].

In the chilled silence the old senator surveyed the faces of the other politicians wrathfully, letting his fiery gaze linger accusingly on each man.

His aged voice lashed at them.

Caecina now delivers another speech at least as long as his earlier one, in which he berates the senators (208–209):

What have you let yourselves become? . . . You have here today destroyed and despoiled your heritage . . . You are worse than all the enemies of Rome who are armed on all our frontiers. You are traitors! . . . Traitors not only to your nation – but betrayers of the whole civilized world and of centuries to come.

Caecina then predicts the fall of Rome, “the tumult and convulsive agony” to come, and the arrival of the Vandals, who will find “not a city – only its tomb – for you have today killed Rome. Rome is no more.” Caecina points at Commodus in direct accusation. Julianus now unexpectedly kills Caecina by stabbing him in the back: “Caecina straightened . . . His gray head twisted . . . as if to look one last time upon the place where he had spent most of his long and honorable life. He staggered and fell.” Julianus instigates all to shout “Hail Caesar!” The Praetorians lead Livius away. “The cheers rang around the emperor, but Commodus, shuddering, was gazing at the dead body of Caecina.”

If we subtract the melodrama from Whittington’s retelling we can see why Currie was the best casting choice for the old senator. His fate is symbolic, both as a foreshadowing of Rome’s eventual fate and as a recollection of the murdered emperor whom he resembles. The fall of the Roman Empire is still in the future, but the true Rome is already dead. Although the film succeeds in getting this point across well enough and even Mann may have agreed to eliminating this scene because of its wordiness, Caecina’s death might still have been worthy of inclusion for its poignancy.⁸⁸

In the absence of thorough research for surviving footage not contained in the release version and without the kind of careful restoration that has given new life to many film classics, this chapter section has had to be rather speculative. But we understand why *The Fall of the Roman*

⁸⁸ As Mann said in “Action Speaks Louder than Words”: “What you see is the only truth” in cinema.

Empire would and could have been an even better film. A fair assessment of the qualities of any work of art, high or popular, ancient or modern, will consider the circumstances of its production and its later fate in order to reach a conclusive verdict. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* deserves a fully restored edition, if such is still possible. Some questions, however, may never be answered. Why, for instance, do we hear two different narrators at the beginning and end? And some baffling details may never be cleared up. When Commodus, newly in power, is addressing Roman leaders for the first time, he begins by referring to the death of Marcus Aurelius: “When the – .” But he interrupts himself and says: “When my father was dying . . .” Presumably Commodus originally meant to continue with the word “emperor.” Why the change? Neither Commodus nor his listeners nor we in the audience can know yet that his true father is the gladiator Verulus. In Whittington’s novel Commodus simply says: “When it was known my father was dying . . .” (110).

7. Imperial Powers: Rome and America

What may strike new viewers most forcefully is how topical *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is today. Its overarching theme is that of the uses and abuses of imperial power in a civilization that is culturally advanced and militarily without equal but at the same time internally divided. And it is involved in warfare on borders far away from the homeland. To overstate the case only slightly, Americans have seen parallels as well as differences between their own and Roman history for over two centuries and have wondered, often anxiously: *Are we Rome?*⁸⁹ Since their origins

⁸⁹ I here allude to the title of Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2007; rpt. New York: Mariner Books, 2008). Cf. Jost Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: Norton, 2006; rpt. 2007); Amy Chua, *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance – and Why They Fall* (New York: Doubleday, 2007); Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: Norton, 2008); and Thomas F. Madden, *Empires of Trust: How Rome Built – and America Is Building – a New World* (New York: Dutton, 2008). Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (2000; new ed. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004; rpt. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), and *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), form a trilogy of interrelated studies. These are only a few among numerous recent books and articles on aspects of empire in current American politics, whose intellectual quality and political outlook vary considerably. Cf. the review article by Alan Ryan, “What Happened to the American Empire?” *The New York Review of Books* (October 23, 2008), 59–62, with brief comments on the concept of “soft power” as applied to geopolitics by political scientist Joseph Nye.

lie in a successful revolution against the mightiest empire at the time, they have been understandably reluctant to refer to their country as an empire, but the reality of power since the Louisiana Purchase and belief in Manifest Destiny – “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” the title of Emanuel Leutze’s allegorical painting of 1861 – suggest nothing less.⁹⁰ The following two assessments of the United States after 1945 are apt. Political scientist Arthur Schlesinger wrote, somewhat defensively, in 1949:

History has thrust a world destiny on the United States. No nation, perhaps, has become a more reluctant great power. Not conquest but homesickness moved the men of Bradley and Stilwell; Frankfurt or Tokyo were but way-stations on the road back to Gopher Prairie. Our businessmen, instead of welcoming the opportunities of empire, spend their time resisting its responsibilities. The pro-consul is such a rare political type that we become dependent on the few we have simply because we cannot replace them.⁹¹

Schlesinger’s words may sound quaint to observers of American power politics in the early twenty-first century, but they accurately describe how Americans viewed themselves in the Truman and Eisenhower years. Clark Clifford, President Harry Truman’s aide from 1946 to 1950, said in the early 1970s:

When the Second World War was over, we were the one great power in the world. The Soviets had a substantial military machine, but they could not touch us in power. We had this enormous force that had been built up. We had the greatest fleet in the world. We’d come through the war economically sound. And I think that, in addition to feeling a sense of responsibility, we also began to feel the sense of a world power, that possibly we could control the future of the world.

These words, spoken about a year after the withdrawal of the American forces from Vietnam, come from an interview in *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis’s classic documentary film of 1974 about that war. Confidence in

⁹⁰ On this see especially William Appleman Williams, *Empire As a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America’s Present Predicament, along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980; rpt. 1982), and Stephen Burman, *The State of the American Empire: How the USA Shapes the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949; rpt. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 219.

the country's ability to control the future of the world, to make it safe for democracy and ready for the American Way of Life, had been thoroughly undermined. But less than thirty years later and in connection with new American wars, American power was once again being touted as guarantor of the Western way of life. David Frum and Richard Perle wrote in 2003:

now that the United States has become the greatest of all great powers in world history, its triumph has shown that freedom is irresistible . . . A world at peace; a world governed by law; a world in which all peoples are free to find their own destinies: That dream has not yet come true, it will not come true soon, but if it ever does come true, it will be brought into being by American armed might and defended by American might, too.⁹²

This is only one example of how neoconservatives have come to view their country after it became the sole remaining superpower. The two writers quoted are careful to frame their passion for power in innocuous-sounding terms, as they do here:

America's vocation is not an imperial vocation. Our vocation is to support justice with power. It is a vocation that has earned us terrible enemies. It is a vocation that has made us, at our best moments, the hope of the world.⁹³

But they are being coy. Earlier, another neoconservative apologist had not minced any words about what he called "a liberal and humanitarian imperialism, to be sure, but imperialism all the same."⁹⁴

⁹² Quoted from David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 275 and 279 (in the book's concluding chapter, entitled "A War for Liberty"). Frum was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, Perle had been Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Ronald Reagan and Chairman of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee under President Bush from 2001–2003. Their book is a defense of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, about which Perle changed his mind in 2006. On him cf. Alan Weisman, *Prince of Darkness: Richard Perle: The Kingdom, the Power, and the End of Empire in America* (New York: Union Square Press, 2007).

⁹³ Frum and Perle, *An End to Evil*, 279, the conclusion of their book.

⁹⁴ Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *The Weekly Standard* (October 15, 2001), 27–30; quotation at 28. For the wider context cf. Monica S. Cyrino, "Gladiator and Contemporary American Society," in Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History*, 124–149, especially 144–148. Decades earlier Gore Vidal, novelist and one of the uncredited screenwriters for Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, had had an eye-opening experience in this regard concerning his series of American-historical novels with the overarching title *Narratives of Empire*: "I had been taken to task by *Time* magazine in a review of my first book of essays. . . . *Time*

Hollywood epics made after World War II frequently contain comparisons and contrasts between the Roman Empire and the American superpower. But *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reflects, and reflects on, historical analogies more openly. Compare the following disquisition on Roman imperial power by an apologist of Commodus at a time when Rome had become the greatest of all great powers in world history until then:

Caesar has asked me: "When has Rome ever been greater or stronger?" I say in answer to Caesar: "Never has Rome been greater or stronger than *now*." And what is it that has kept our empire together? Our *strength!* Our *might!*

And:

We are Romans, warriors . . . Teach them once and for all what it is to make war on Rome. *That* is the Roman way!

The debate in the senate is about the admission of barbarians into the empire as Roman citizens. Far-right arguments in modern American debates about immigration can echo that voiced here by Commodus' henchman down to a close verbal similarity. Patrick Buchanan draws the following parallel between Rome and America in regard to Emperor Valens' admission of "a great horde of [Gothic] refugees" into the empire in AD 376. Valens was killed in a revolt by Goths two years later at the Battle of Hadrianople. Buchanan concludes from this, with apparent satisfaction: "What Valens had done was the Christian thing to do, but it had never been the Roman thing to do." To Buchanan the Roman thing is preferable.⁹⁵ To Buchanan, *that* is the American way.

Our strength, our might – to be used against the barbarians at the gates. Several times in twentieth-century history fences, walls, or barriers were built in the name of security and defense in order to keep others out: in French Algeria, in Northern Ireland, on the US–Mexican border,

wrote that I had dared to refer to our minatory global presence as 'an empire' which of course it could *not* be as we were, in the Luce publications, Christian goodness incarnate. It seems I had . . . said the unsayable too soon. I was subversive." Quoted from Gore Vidal, *Point to Point Navigation: A Memoir, 1964–2006* (2006; rpt. New York: Vintage, 2007), 123.

⁹⁵ Patrick J. Buchanan, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2006; rpt. 2007), 3. Buchanan bases his analysis – if that is the right word, since nuance is not his strong suit – on, and quotes from, Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; rpt. 2006), xi and 158.

and on the West Bank of the Jordan River. Their efficacy is debatable.⁹⁶ Moderate Americans may consider Buchanan's policies on immigration unrealistic, just as viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are not meant to agree with the speaker's naked expression of the realpolitik of imperial power. The elder statesman rebukes him:

There are millions . . . waiting at our gates. If we do not open these gates, they will break them down and destroy us. But instead, let us grow ever bigger, ever greater; let us take them among us.

I discuss the debate on power and morality in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in greater detail in Chapter Eight. But the similarity in the stance of today's neoconservatives and of the fictional Roman is striking. It indicates how topical *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is (and may remain). Film critic and historian Richard Corliss accordingly began an appreciation of Mann's career in 2006 in the following way: "Do you think old movies can't speak to today's concerns? See some of Anthony Mann's films and think again. They spoke for their time; they speak to ours."⁹⁷ After discussing *El Cid* in the opening section of his article (called "Jihads"), Corliss goes over Mann's most important films and points out their current relevance. About *The Fall of the Roman Empire* he is predictably as critical as many others have been, but his first mention of it is this:

The villain of Mann's 1964 *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is the Emperor Commodus (Christopher Plummer), a weak man with a drunken past who says he was divinely chosen to make war against the Middle Eastern tribes. His one sensible adviser, Timonides (James Mason), warns that "Their hatred will live for centuries to come. Rivers of Roman blood will pay for this. You will make nations of them, killers of them." But Commodus is deaf to pleas of reason: "You will tell Egypt, Syria, the entire eastern half of the Empire, that if there is the slightest resistance to my orders, I will destroy them." He is also bent on redressing what he sees as the military flabbiness of an earlier President – sorry, Emperor: "You must also let them know they must forget the weakness of my father."

The heading that Corliss gives this description is "Imperial hubris." His quotation of Timonides is imprecise – Timonides does not use the words

⁹⁶ On the West Bank barrier as a particularly instructive example see Sylvain Cypel, *Walled: Israeli Society at an Impasse* (New York: Other Press, 2007), and Amos Elon, "Olmert and Israel: The Change," *The New York Review of Books* (February 14, 2008), 23–26.

⁹⁷ Richard Corliss, "Mann of the Hour," *Time* (August 4, 2006); quoted from <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1223014,00.html>.

“nations” or “killers” – but Corliss is right to point out that *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is an “investigation of that favorite Mann strategy: the debate between urgent humanism and mad militarism.”⁹⁸ Another film scholar has observed:

The important issue is raised of how far imperialism . . . conflicts with personal liberties . . . *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was a trail-blazer in several ways, but it was also one of the last of its kind [and] consciously pares down the requirements of the historical epic to the bare essentials.⁹⁹

The conflict of state power and individual rights and the debate about citizenship and immigration as evinced in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are also due to the personal experience of blacklisted screenwriter Ben Barzman. Born in Canada, he had become an American citizen in order to serve in the US Navy, but the status of his health prevented him from taking up his commission. He had joined the Communist Party and fled the United States with his family during the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.¹⁰⁰ But even in exile he preserved a strong feeling of attachment to the country he had adopted as his home. To viewers aware of this modern background of the film’s plot the enlightened perspective in the speeches of Marcus Aurelius, Timonides, and the old senator takes on added resonance. To no small degree the three Romans say about their country what one American had been feeling about his. The greatness of Rome in this film, being squandered by an irresponsible government, parallels the contemporary situation, in which some of the ideals that define the greatness of America have been abandoned.

The subject of personal or group liberties in conflict with oppressors is crucial to virtually all American or American-based history films and reappears in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, but with one significant change. This film attempts an appreciation of the greatness of Rome in terms of culture and civilization, not of imperialism. This latter side surfaces with the announcement – better, the threat – by Commodus of the naked militarism he intends to apply and in the defense of this strategy

⁹⁸ More jarring, historically, is his exaggerated assertion about Commodus and Christianity shortly after. But cf., e.g., Fulvio Grosso, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (Turin: Accademie delle scienze, 1964), 669–678.

⁹⁹ Elly, *The Epic Film*, 108.

¹⁰⁰ Barzman’s wife gives a detailed account in *The Red and the Blacklist*, to which I refer interested readers.

by his henchmen. Without wishing to advance any political message, I quote a modern historian and political commentator on the situation of the United States concerning Iran in the summer of 2008:

At a moment of serious challenge, battered by two wars, ballooning debt, and a faltering economy, the United States appears to have lost its capacity to think clearly. Consider what passes for national discussion on the matter of Iran. The open question is whether the United States should or will attack Iran [over the issue of nuclear weapons] . . . President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are the primary authors of these threats, but others join them in proclaiming that “all options” must remain “on the table.” The option they wish to emphasize is the option of military attack . . . Is there anyone outside the US government who thinks it makes sense to invite trouble on this scale? . . . Bush has a history. On his own authority, without the sanction of any international body, he attacked Iraq five years ago and precipitated a bloody chain of events that shows no sign of ending . . . Talking, negotiating, proposing alternatives . . . – in short, all the other “options on the table” – came to be seen [during the 1990s] in certain Republican [Party] circles as time-wasting, irresolute, and futile – a pattern of weakness that invites defiance.¹⁰¹

Even if we keep obvious differences in mind, most of this analysis could describe the Rome of Commodus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The “Roman way” as demonstrated by his rule seems to have found an equivalent in a newly proposed “American way.” Commodus’ announcement of his New World Order that Corliss quoted in 2006 (“They must forget the weakness of my father”) sounds even more important in 2008. Which other historical film can claim such topicality?

The Fall of the Roman Empire delivers the excitement, spectacle, action, and romance audiences expect from their epics, but it transcends them. The film articulates the meaning of historical cinema with greater eloquence, passion, and conviction than any other ancient epics have managed to do. We may compare a moment near the end of Wyler’s *Ben-Hur*, perhaps the most famous of all films set in a world ruled by Rome and one that casts a long shadow even over Mann’s. (Noteworthy in both is the theme of male friendship leading to mortal enmity.) Pontius Pilate informs Ben-Hur that he has received Roman citizenship, a major concern in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, but Ben-Hur rejects it together

¹⁰¹ Thomas Powers, “Iran: The Threat,” *The New York Review of Books* (July 17, 2008), 9–11; quotations at 9–10. For a wider perspective cf. Thomas Powers, *The Military Error: Baghdad and Beyond in America’s War of Choice* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008).

with what he calls “the cruelty of Rome.” Pilate then explains to him the nature of empire:

Where there is greatness, great government or power, even great feeling or compassion, error also is great. We progress and mature by fault . . . Perfect freedom has no existence. A grown man knows the world he lives in, and for the present the world is Rome . . . when I go up those stairs I become the hand of Caesar, ready to crush all those who challenge his authority. There are too many small men of envy and ambition, who try to disrupt the government of Rome.

These words fully serve the purpose of the story in which they occur, but that story is about religious edification (Christianity vs. paganism), not about the nature of a pre- or non-Christian civilization. As a result, its Rome is an evil empire.¹⁰² And *Ben-Hur* is an action film, whose star once characterized it as “a melodrama . . . basically about a chariot race.”¹⁰³ The morality of secular power, central to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, is incidental to *Ben-Hur*, which deals more with the spiritual power of the meek who shall inherit the earth. *Ben-Hur* characterizes his and his family’s fate as “a tragedy.” Only by the grace of God will the course of human suffering and oppression be reversed. When the film is reaching its ending, any discussion of power and empire has been forgotten. The poignant epilogue to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* resonates wider and deeper: “A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.”

Spartacus, a film which Anthony Mann had been originally set to direct, is often called “the thinking man’s epic.” This description is accurate enough, but the film about ancient Roman history that most deserves this title and that demands thinking and feeling viewers is *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. It gives us the sense of what Pliny the Elder, the great Roman scholar and scientist, once memorably called “the immense majesty of the Roman peace.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Cf. my comments on *Ben-Hur* in “The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945,” 69–72.

¹⁰³ The quotation is taken from an interview included among the supplemental materials on the 1996 laserdisc edition of *El Cid*. *El Cid* was Heston’s immediate follow-up to *Ben-Hur*. He also observes that the medieval epic was “a real story” about a hero.

¹⁰⁴ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 27.1.3: *immensa Romanae pacis maiestate*. In the next sentence Pliny expresses the wish that these gifts of the gods to the human race might be eternal.

CHAPTER TWO

History, Ancient and Modern, in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Allen M. Ward

What makes *The Fall of the Roman Empire* a worthy film from a historian's point of view is both how seriously its director, producer, and screenwriters approached the history they portrayed and how vigorously they addressed political, social, and moral issues of the 1960s at the same time.¹ While Anthony Mann usually took pains to avoid overt sermonizing and moralizing, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is an exception.² It contains much talk, something that Mann usually avoided: "Films above everything else are pictures and you ground them pictorially. I don't believe in talk, not for films. That's for the theatre. Here you see it."³

Exceptional times, however, called for an exceptional film. When *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was released, memories of World War II and its

¹ On this see Martin M. Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154, at 140–146; Peter W. Rose, "The Politics of *Gladiator*," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 150–172, at 171; and Jeanine Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 2nd ed. (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 162.

² Mann expressed his aversion to sermonizing and moralizing in J. H. Fenwick and Jonathan G. Armytage, "Now You See It: Landscape and Anthony Mann," *Sight and Sound*, 34 no. 4 (1965), 186–189, at 187. Cf. Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 5.

³ Mann in Fenwick and Armytage, "Now You See It," 186. Cf. his warning about wordiness in film in Anthony Mann, "Empire Demolition," an essay reprinted in this volume.

devastation were still fresh. Fascist ideology advocating the barbarous destruction of those considered alien and the brutal conquest of the weaker by the stronger still inspired revulsion. The United States was reeling from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, who had summoned the country to greatness by appealing to core values of American liberalism. The fear that a Cold War world divided into two implacably hostile armed camps would eventually destroy itself and all of civilization in a nuclear holocaust had almost been realized during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the fall of 1962. Lyndon Johnson, who was about to lead the United States into a costly and internally divisive war because he could not see beyond the Cold War, would exploit the fear of a nuclear holocaust against his no less blind conservative opponent, Barry Goldwater, to win the presidency in the fall of 1964. Moreover, the hostility of Barry Goldwater and the right wing of the Republican Party toward the United Nations seemed to threaten the last best hope that liberal intellectuals saw for the rational and peaceful resolution of the conflicts that threatened to engulf the world. Also, the Civil Rights Movement was challenging the racism and violence that had too long denied black citizens their rightful share of the American Dream. That movement came to fruition in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson, at great political cost to himself and the Democratic Party, pushed landmark civil rights legislation through Congress.⁴

There can be no doubt that Timonides, the philosopher-aide to Emperor Marcus Aurelius in Mann's film, is making a conscious reference to the Civil Rights Movement when he says in the film's second half: "Here we meet in friendship, the blond peoples from the North and the dark people from the South." Timonides then universalizes this message of peace and brotherhood by exclaiming: "What we have done here can be done the whole world over!" Here he reflects the spirit of liberal internationalism epitomized by the newly created Peace Corps and President Kennedy's inaugural address of January 20, 1961, in which he promised to bear any burden in the cause of bringing freedom and equality to the rest of the world.⁵ Such universal application was a primary goal of the

⁴ Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187, refers to the relevance of a number of these issues to the film.

⁵ On Kennedy's speech see now Thurston Clarke, *Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America* (New York: Holt, 2004; rpt. 2005). That in the early 1960s Kennedy's speech could be applied to, or at least reflect on, ancient contexts becomes evident in Martin M. Winkler, "The Holy Cause of Freedom: American Ideals in *Spartacus*," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 154–188, at 187–188.

filmmakers, as Mann acknowledged: “we tried to make it all as modern as possible so that it could be related to any society; so that people would understand.”⁶

Mann also asserted that he was trying to “dramatize how an empire fell.”⁷ At a crucial point in the film a distinguished white-haired senator directly asks: “How does an empire fall?” That question, however, has to be seen in a global context and beyond any narrow concern about whether a new post-war American empire might fall as Rome’s empire did. Although the United States had created a hegemonic empire after 1945, it was not the kind of territorial empire established by eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European powers that defined the term “empire” for most Americans. The majority of Americans and their political leaders, reacting to Russian and Chinese communists’ condemnations of what they saw as American imperialism, vigorously denied that the United States was an empire at all or had any imperialistic pretensions. It has only been since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which President Ronald Reagan’s famously called an “evil empire,” that neoconservative American pundits and politicians have reached back to the nineteenth century and publicly embraced the idea of an imperial America, one whose burden now is to police the world and whose unilateral interests trump those of other nations.

Liberals of the 1960s were anxious to prevent the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union from leading to a nuclear holocaust and the worldwide collapse of civilization. Producer Samuel Bronston and director Anthony Mann had recently made films on similar themes, as civilized rivals or discordant peoples and nations united to create a peaceful and prosperous world order: Mann and Bronston together with *El Cid* (1961) and Bronston with *55 Days at Peking* (1962).⁸ Their theme reappears in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Significantly, at the very end of this film, the narrator’s voice-over tells us that *civilizations*, not *empires*, have to destroy themselves from within before they can be destroyed from without.

The Fall of the Roman Empire begins just before the death of Marcus Aurelius in AD 180, when the Roman Empire had come to encompass and embody all of ancient Greco-Roman civilization. For most people in the Western world of 1964, that meant virtually all of civilization before

⁶ Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” *Screen*, 10, no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 54.

⁷ Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 53.

⁸ Cf. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992; rpt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 504–512.

the European Middle Ages. In the last chapter of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a work which has extensive connections with Mann's film, Edward Gibbon had indelibly implanted that idea in the minds of most Westerners, historians and laymen alike, when he quoted, with approval, the learned fifteenth-century scholar Poggio Bracciolini, who called the Capitol at Rome the former "citadel of the earth," and when he said that his whole study had "described the triumph of barbarism and religion."⁹ Very early in his work Gibbon had virtually equated all mankind with the population of the Roman Empire:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.¹⁰

Heavily influenced by Gibbon, Mann can hardly have avoided seeing the Roman Empire as the civilized world. An image of Rome encompassing the nations of the world as an ancient United Nations appears shortly after the film opens. Marcus Aurelius holds a review of leaders of different peoples from Rome's far-flung provinces and of some foreign allies. They have gathered to help the benevolent emperor realize his vision of a world united in peace and harmony. Marcus is on the Danube frontier, where he must fight the barbarian tribes who attack the civilized world, but he prefers to assimilate them peacefully. Just before the review he had told Livius, his trusted general and the ostensible hero of the story: "It is time we found peaceful ways to live with those you call barbarians." Once the various units of diverse ethnicities are gathered together in a rainbow of different-colored military standards and uniforms, Aurelius tells them that they are "the unity which is Rome." He explains the need to eliminate all frontiers. "Rome," he says, "wants and needs human frontiers." He envisions "golden centuries of peace, a true *pax Romana*," which will bring to "all, *all*, the supreme right of Roman citizenship, a family of equal nations. That is what lies ahead."

⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (Everyman's Library; New York: Knopf, 1993), here 6, 617 and 624. This modern-spelling edition reprints the text of the seven-volume edition by J. B. Bury (1896–1900). Below, references to Gibbon's work are according to volume and page of this edition, abbreviated by *HDF*.

¹⁰ *HDF* 1, 90.

In the spirit of Marcus Aurelius, now dead, Livius will later refrain from slaughtering the barbarians once they have been defeated. Instead he sends Timonides with a generous offer to settle them on Roman lands if they will peacefully surrender and accept Roman citizenship. While enduring a brutal trial by fire, Timonides upholds Aurelius' vision and persuades the barbarian chieftain Ballomar to accept the Romans' offer. Timonides expresses Aurelius' liberal ideals even more eloquently when he is allowed to argue before the Roman senate and Aurelius' unworthy heir, Commodus, for the government's approval to grant citizenship and vacant land to the barbarians. Racial, ethnic, and class prejudices rear their heads among the senators as Timonides is assailed with shouts of "Greek, Greek" and "slave" while conservative hard-liners argue that Rome must use fire and sword to teach barbarians not to challenge the authority of Rome. But Timonides employs the same Stoic calm, selfless devotion to duty, and reasonableness that he had exhibited before the barbarians. The audience is reminded of that scene as Timonides constantly massages his right hand, which Ballomar had burned in the flames. Gradually Timonides begins to turn the tide against the perpetuation of hatred and war. In a second round of debates the old senator who asks how an empire dies answers his question in a speech that counters the mean-spirited and small-minded arguments of Julianus, a dark-haired and shifty-looking senator. (Overtones of Richard Nixon?) Julianus is a henchman and mouthpiece of Commodus, who has already revealed himself as the self-centered, profligate, cruel, and despotic opposite of Aurelius.

Although the liberal forces of world peace and brotherhood win the debate, noble Livius is permanently posted to the desolate northern frontier and forbidden to see Commodus' sister, Lucilla. She and Livius are still in love, although she had dutifully followed her father's wishes and married the Armenian king Sohamus – the historical Sohaemus – to cement a crucial alliance between Armenia and Rome. When Commodus callously requisitions grain from the starving eastern provinces to feed the population of Rome during a famine, the provinces revolt under the leadership of Lucilla and Sohamus. Lucilla's goal is to take Rome itself and make her father's liberal vision a reality. Sohamus, however, secretly allies his forces with Persia, Rome's only enemy on the eastern frontier. Recalled by a desperate Commodus, Livius comes with an army in time to save the East. Rebellious Roman generals now throw their support behind their fellow Romans when they realize that Persia would take over the East if Rome lost.

The great battle against the forces of Persia and King Sohamus has been interpreted as a cautionary tale not to let such a war break out between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹¹ If there is any analogy with the Soviets in the film, however, it is Armenia. At the time *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was made, Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. Before the estrangement of the Cold War the Soviet Union had been a valuable ally of the United States against Germany in World War II. Despite the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and perhaps even because of its peaceful resolution, a new view of the Communist threat was gaining momentum. *55 Days at Peking* had previously reflected this view, in which “the possibilities of co-existence with the Soviets appeared more plausible, while the onus of ideological fanaticism and aggressive support for the ‘wars of national liberation’ was identified with . . . Red China.”¹²

It makes greater sense to see the image of Communist China behind the depiction of Persia in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Ever since the wars between the Greeks and the Persians in the early fifth century BC, Persia has represented the Orient, with masses of barbaric subjects enslaved to despotic rulers – in opposition to the West, whose freedom-loving individuals govern themselves and fight willingly to preserve their freedoms. The Persian army in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is “a mass of warriors; there are no individuals to be distinguished among them, not even generals. They are exotic barbarians, anonymous, incomprehensible, and alien.”¹³ That description is similar to the American picture of fanatical and anonymous Asian hordes from only a decade earlier: the Red Chinese Army being driven in wave upon human wave against brave but vastly outnumbered American forces in Korea.¹⁴ Growing tensions between Soviet Russia and her ostensible Chinese Communist ally on her eastern borders were already causing some strategic thinkers to reevaluate US policy. They began to speculate that the West could effect a rapprochement with its old ally Russia against the rising threat of China. That would also reduce the threat of a nuclear holocaust, which only Russia and the United States could precipitate at that time.

Despite Mann’s avowed attempt to make *The Fall of the Roman Empire* as contemporary as possible for a 1960s audience, there is no doubt that

¹¹ So Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 149–150.

¹² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 507.

¹³ Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 150.

¹⁴ Mann’s own statement in “Empire Demolition” that “the barbarians were breeding like the Chinese today” supports this view. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 141–142, also notes the rise of China as a third superpower.

he and the screenwriters took Roman history seriously. Their film does not present a simplistic account of Rome's fall. At both opening and closing, a voice-over quotes words by the film's historical consultant, Will Durant. The opening repeats almost word for word the first paragraph of Durant's epilogue to *Caesar and Christ*, which itself owes much to Edward Gibbon:

The two greatest problems in history are how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall. We may come nearer to understanding the truth if we remember that the fall of Rome, like her rise, did not have one cause but many and was not an event but a process spread over three hundred years. Some nations have not lasted as long as Rome fell.¹⁵

At the close the narrator reminds viewers that they have seen only "the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire" and then quotes the beginning of Durant's next paragraph: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."¹⁶

In between, the filmmakers have worked hard to portray these ideas. At the beginning we see the process of empire-building still moving forward under the wise and enlightened leadership of Marcus Aurelius. The initial bleak winter scene on the Danube frontier reminds us how far the Roman Empire has expanded from its sunny Mediterranean heartland. A little later, the review of troops and leaders of provinces and allied kingdoms, stretching from Britain to Armenia and from Gaul to Africa, reinforces the idea of the empire's huge extent and diversity. So, much later, do the shots of a great sandstone fortress when Livius marches back after crushing the rebellion in the East. The dark, menacing, massive towers and walls of Aurelius' lofty camp, the soldiers on garrison duty, the impressive cavalry escort that accompanies the arrival of Livius in his four-horse chariot, the ordered ranks of heavily armed infantry marching off to battle against the unseen barbarians lurking in the vast forest below, and the infliction, if in an unhistorical way, of the death

¹⁵ Cf. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3: *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to AD 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944; several rpts.), 665. The only change from his text is the lack of any indication that the first sentence is a quotation. In his "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West" (*HDF* 4, 117–128) Gibbon remarked that "instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long" (119).

¹⁶ The only change from Durant's wording (*Caesar and Christ*, 665) is the addition of "from" before "within."

penalty on every tenth man (*decimatio*) in a unit that had shown cowardice in the ensuing unsuccessful battle – all underscore the highly disciplined might that had allowed Rome to absorb temporary losses and expand the empire's frontiers to the vast northern forests that are shown in panoramic shots from the Roman camp.¹⁷

While Marcus Aurelius' speech has presented an idealistic picture of the empire at its apex, the grim fortress and dark forests, the failing health of Aurelius himself, his assassination, his thwarted desire to pass over his unworthy son, and his funeral in the falling snow all reinforce the feeling that Rome has irrevocably left its greatness behind. Nevertheless, there is no straight downward slide. The power and grandeur that Rome still has are illustrated by Commodus' magnificent triumphal entry into Rome and his procession through the Roman Forum to the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, with its massive gold and ivory statue of the god inside. Livius also manages to defeat Ballomar, just as the good men still in the senate succeed in realizing Aurelius' enlightened dream of making the barbarians Roman citizens. Even when Commodus' megalomania, fiscal irresponsibility, and callous disregard for his famine-plagued eastern provinces have driven commanders and allies to revolt, all is not lost. There is still enough military manpower and responsible leadership and still enough patriotism in the rebels who switch to Livius' side to ensure that Rome's foreign enemies are defeated and the empire preserved. Even in the last part of the film the end of the empire, still in the distant future, is not seen. Marcus Aurelius' ideals lie dead with Timonides and the recently enfranchised Germans killed or captured when Commodus ordered their village destroyed. Yet the end of Rome is only foreshadowed with allusions to several destructive factors, all derived from the pages of Gibbon: Christianity, barbarian invasions, excessive taxation, soldiers ever ready to sacrifice the public interest in return for gold, a degenerate and self-indulgent populace, and a corrupt political class greedy only for power in the moment.

Throughout the first half of the film Christianity is conspicuous by its absence. The script presents the decline in purely Roman terms, that is to say, "not as the conflict between paganism and Christianity which most cinemagoers would have expected."¹⁸ Mann himself criticized films that "gave the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about," claimed that "it was a minor incident in the greatness of the Roman Empire," and said that he and his

¹⁷ Cf. Fenwick and Armytage, "Now You See It," 189, and Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 83–85.

¹⁸ Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 140.

writers “wanted to tell the Roman story and not the Christian story.”¹⁹ Therefore Christianity appears only once and in a very understated way. When Livius bends over the body of the slain Timonides, the camera momentarily reveals a pendant lying on his breast. It is in the form of a Christogram, the Greek letters *chi* [X] and *rho* [P], the latter superimposed over the former.

This one image speaks volumes. Its fleeting appearance underscores Mann’s point that Christianity had not yet assumed the powerful role in imperial life and politics that it would play a century later. More importantly, the possession of this symbol by the philosopher Timonides reflects how much Christianity had in common with the Stoic philosophy that he, a fictional character, and Marcus Aurelius, the historical emperor, shared and how often the early Church Fathers who shaped Christian doctrine were trained in the great pagan philosophical schools of Athens and Alexandria.²⁰ Most of all, it reminds viewers that Christianity rose from obscurity to transform the late Roman Empire in such a way that Gibbon would link it with Rome’s decline: “As the happiness of a *future* life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire.”²¹ Still, Gibbon ultimately saw the cause as arising from the nature of the empire itself:

But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.²²

Mann, however, in his eagerness to avoid the stereotypical Hollywood presentation of the battle between Christians and pagans, seems to have

¹⁹ Mann, “Empire Demolition.”

²⁰ It is curious that Stoicism, the philosophy that Aurelius and Timonides embody, is never named in the film. Perhaps it was assumed that most people were aware that Marcus Aurelius’ writings, which the film prominently features, are monuments of Stoic philosophy. On the close relationship between Christianity and Stoicism see the “Introduction” by Maxwell Staniforth, a British clergyman, to his translation of *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; several rpts.), 7–27, at 23–27. For the influence of pagan philosophical training on the Church Fathers in general see Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

²¹ *HDF* 4, 120.

²² *HDF* 4, 119.

gone too far in removing religion from the period covered in the film. As Gibbon remarked in the opening sentence of Chapter XV: "A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman empire."²³ The rise of Christianity and other Eastern mystery religions, focused on a personal savior-god distinct from the old civic deities of the Greek city-states and the official cults of Rome, was a symptom of the growing sense that the Roman Empire was failing to meet the needs and inspire the loyalty of a large segment of its population. As will be suggested later, the film could have explored this theme through some explicit references to the spread of religions like Isism, Mithraism, and Christianity, in particular to the suspicion and hostility felt toward Christianity. Instead, the barbarian invasions that overwhelmed the weakened western half of the Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries AD are foreshadowed more dramatically than the rise of Christianity. Just as Queen Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* foreshadows the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage by uttering a baleful curse from the flames of her funeral pyre, so the captured German villagers who are being burned at the stake by mad Emperor Commodus' final command invoke the curse of their god Wotan on the Roman Empire. Thus, as Gibbon emphasized in Chapters XIV and XVII, the Romans themselves did much to turn the barbarians into a disaster for the empire. One self-inflicted wound that he underscores is the excessive taxation that exhausted the inhabitants, particularly the agricultural segment, and made them unwilling to support the empire or even turned them actively against it. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* illustrates that problem when Commodus despotically doubles the taxes of the eastern provinces to provide luxuries for Rome and so drives them to revolt.

Gibbon repeatedly commented on the lax discipline and insufficient loyalty that made the late Roman soldiery a threat to public tranquility and to the state.²⁴ The film illustrates those problems when, near the end, Commodus' henchmen distribute huge quantities of gold coins to subvert the loyalty of the troops who were supposed to help Livius and Lucilla overthrow the mad tyrant and restore enlightened government to Rome. As the soldiers hastily abandon their ranks in a scramble to scoop up the coins showered upon them, even Victorinus, once one of Livius' most loyal officers, deserts to grab his share. When a distraught Lucilla demands to know why, Victorinus, clutching a helmet full of coins,

²³ HDF 1, 487.

²⁴ So in HDF, Chapters VI–VIII, XVII, and XXXVIII.

explains to her that the world has changed. After her father's reign there have been no profitable wars to reward Roman soldiers with shares of booty; now they have to seek their fortunes from whatever source they can. The point is driven home again at the very end. As virtuous Livius refuses the proffered throne of the now hopelessly corrupt empire, power-hungry senators are cynically outbidding each other with offers of huge bribes to the soldiers who would help them seize power.

That scene, combined with Livius' earlier failure to rally a subservient and sycophantic senate to overthrow Commodus, also underscores what Gibbon saw as the incapacity of the empire's political class to provide the virtuous leadership necessary to preserve Rome's greatness.²⁵ Gibbon, however, did not fault only Rome's leaders. He also condemned the Roman populace for its superstition.²⁶ That factor in Rome's fall is illustrated near the end of the film when Commodus, having been declared a god by the subservient senate, puts on a spectacular celebration to inspire the irrational reverence of the common people and divert them from the desperate reality of the despotism that is destroying Rome.²⁷ A huge bronze sculpture in the shape of the hand of the god Sabazius bestowing a blessing appears on the *rostra* in the Forum and towers over the assembled throngs. Nestled in the hand is the armless bust of Sabazius himself atop a tapered flat-sided pillar in the manner of a Greek herm. Double doors on the front of the pillar slowly open to reveal Commodus, arms crossed diagonally across his chest in the Egyptian manner. The people ecstatically greet him as he gradually uncrosses his arms, thrusts them forward to embrace the crowd, and slowly descends a few steps to the platform of the *rostra*. The sense of spectacle is heightened by the leopard-skin dress of his personal guard, the impressive molded bronze armor of the spearmen in front of the *rostra*, and the surrounding senators arrayed in all their finery.

The irrational behavior of the masses is seen when Lucilla, deserted by Livius' soldiers, makes a desperate dash into the city to attempt to assassinate her brother. Once inside the walls, she has to force her way through the crowds engaged in the carnival-like celebrations decreed for the advent of their new emperor-god. They are oblivious to the horror and un-Roman barbarity of Commodus' decree that the captive German villagers be burned as human sacrifices to his divinity. The Roman people themselves appear to have taken leave of their senses. Not only are they

²⁵ Cf. *HDF*, Chapter VII.

²⁶ *HDF*, Chapter VII; cf. Chapter II.

²⁷ One is reminded of Gibbon's description of Emperor Philip the Arab's Secular Games celebrating Rome's 1,000th anniversary (*HDF* 1, 213–215).

now unable to sustain Rome's greatness, but they are also unworthy of it.

Thus *The Fall of the Roman Empire* seeks to show, within an expected and commercially driven narrative, the complex factors that, according to Gibbon, operated over a long period of time and eventually brought down the Roman Empire from its height under Marcus Aurelius. What is significant here is the obvious respect shown to serious writers of history, chiefly Gibbon and Durant. The general respect accorded Will Durant in the 1960s is indicated not only by the quotations at the beginning and end of the film but also by his prominent identification in the film's opening credits as the film's historical consultant.

Today it is hard to imagine that historians like Will Durant or Arnold Toynbee, who in the tradition of Gibbon wrote large, multi-volume interpretive histories covering whole civilizations and vast sweeps of time in well-crafted prose, were once widely read and even more widely known by large numbers of people, many of them with no more than a high-school education. Mann himself claimed to have read much in preparation for his film.²⁸ Its plot and style show the influence of serious reading in modern writers like Gibbon or Durant and in ancient sources such as the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio, the collection of emperors' biographies known as the *Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*), and perhaps Herodian's *History of the Empire after Marcus*.²⁹ The screenwriters have worked much specific material from ancient sources into the film. Sometimes they have chosen to use such material for dramatic purposes in a context different from the original one or despite its doubtful historicity, but at least their story is grounded in the ancient historical record, which itself is often as much the product of dramatic and sensationalistic imagination as anything Hollywood could invent.

For example, Dio, the *Historia Augusta*, and Herodian all report Aurelius' supposed concern that his son would not be a worthy successor.³⁰

²⁸ Cf. Wicking and Pattison, "Interviews with Anthony Mann," 54.

²⁹ The lesser-known and uneven work of Herodian is less likely to have been consulted, but Mann, "Empire Demolition," credits co-screenwriter Basilio Franchina with "enormous amounts of research." So even Herodian may have been used.

³⁰ In this and the following notes, references to the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio, as preserved in the Byzantine excerpts by Xiphilinus, will include the book number assigned by U. P. Boissevain and a slash followed by the book number given by Earnest Cary in the Loeb Classical Library edition. The biographies in the *Historia Augusta* (*Augustan History*) will be abbreviated as *HA*, followed by an abbreviation of the emperor's name. See Dio 72/73.1, *HA Marc.* 27.11–12, and Herodian 1.3.1–4.6.

Dio, a close contemporary and generally considered the most reliable source for his own time, repeats without qualification or cavil a story told to him that a group of men who wished to do Commodus a favor poisoned Aurelius.³¹ In this case it was Aurelius' doctors who plotted his end and not, as in the film, some military officers and his seer, the sinister Cleander. Nevertheless, the essence of the two versions is the same. The method of poisoning, which Dio does not mention, is supplied in the film from another ancient story connected with Marcus Aurelius. The generally less reliable *Historia Augusta* identifies as a rumor unworthy of belief the tale that Marcus poisoned his co-emperor Lucius Verus by using a knife smeared with poison on one side to cut in two a sow's womb – the Roman equivalent of haggis or chitterlings – and giving Verus the half touched by the poisoned side of the blade.³² The scriptwriters substituted an apple for the sow's womb, but the substance of the story is the same.

The ancient stories of Aurelius' premonitions about Commodus' unsuitability for the imperial office and of Aurelius' murder deserve no more credence than the rumors of his poisoning Verus. They probably were fictions created to justify the overthrow and murder of Commodus in AD 192.³³ Equally, attempts to see vague hints of difficulties between father and son in Aurelius' *Meditations* are speculative and unsupported.³⁴ Even as fictions, however, the ancient and modern stories point out the historical truth that Commodus, as *The Fall of the Roman Empire* emphasizes, proved unsuitable for the post he inherited.

A similar ancient fiction repeated in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is the story that Commodus was not the real son of Marcus Aurelius but of a gladiator with whom Aurelius' wife, Faustina, had had an adulterous affair.³⁵ Rumors of Faustina's adulteries and missteps were rife in antiquity.³⁶ As the *Historia Augusta* implies, her liaison with a gladiator seemed to be a reasonable explanation why Commodus, who liked to play the gladiator, had a character so different from his father's, but modern scholars find it difficult to believe these stories of infidelity.³⁷ In

³¹ Dio 71/72.33.4.

³² *HA Marc.* 15.5 and *Verus* 11.2–4.

³³ For Dio's unreliability on these two points see Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), 208–210.

³⁴ Aurelius, *Meditations* 9.11, 10.4, and 11.18.9; cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 218 and 289 note 16.

³⁵ *HA Marc.* 19.1–9.

³⁶ *HA Marc.* 23.7, 26.5, and 29.1–3; *HA Comm.* 8.1; *HA Av. Cass.* 7.1 and 9.9–10; cf. Dio 71/72.22.3.

³⁷ Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 224–225.

The Fall of the Roman Empire, however, they clearly stand behind both Marcus Aurelius' admission to Lucilla that his wife had looked for love elsewhere and the dramatic revelation at the end that Verulus, the trainer and commander of gladiators, was Commodus' father.

Historically Faustina had died probably at the beginning of winter in late AD 175, a little more than four years before the events with which the film opens.³⁸ There is no ancient evidence of the shame and anger that Lucilla expresses in regard to her in the film. On the other hand, Marcus Aurelius' affectionate and forgiving attitude toward Faustina, whatever missteps she may have made, is beautifully expressed in the film and well documented. In his *Meditations* he thanked heaven for such a submissive, loving, and completely unaffected wife.³⁹ Apparently he wrote letters in which he gave no credence to accusations that she had carried on affairs with pantomime actors, and people criticized him for, it was said, turning a blind eye to some of her other lovers and for promoting some of them to important posts.⁴⁰ When she died, she was accompanying Marcus on a tour of the eastern provinces in the aftermath of a revolt by Avidius Cassius, and Marcus procured divine honors for her despite rumors of her complicity with Cassius.⁴¹

The early scene in which Cleander announces a bad omen to Aurelius is another example of the scriptwriters taking something from an ancient source and transferring it to a different context. Cleander claims that he can find no heart in the body of a sacrificial bird. The biography of Commodus' successor Pertinax in the *Historia Augusta* reports that Pertinax, making a sacrifice just before his assassination, suffered the ill omen of failing to find a heart in the sacrificial victim.⁴²

A far more important use of ancient material from another context is the speech of the white-haired senator who supports the proposal to grant citizenship to the conquered German barbarians. With its emphasis on the need for continued growth and change, this speech echoes that which the Roman historian Tacitus put into the mouth of Emperor Claudius, who argued before recalcitrant senators that leading men from the region of Gaul known as Gallia Comata ("Long-Haired Gaul") should receive the right to hold offices that would qualify them for membership in the Roman senate. In Tacitus' version Claudius first argues that Sparta

³⁸ *HA Marc.* 26.4–9; Dio 71/72.29.1. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 286 note 20, on the date.

³⁹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.17.8.

⁴⁰ *HA Marc.* 23.7 and 29.1–3.

⁴¹ *HA Marc.* 24.5–6 and 26.4–9; Dio 71/72.22.3–23.1, 29.1, and 31.1–2.

⁴² *HA Pert.* 11.2.

and Athens were ruined because they refused to incorporate into the body politic those whom they had conquered, whereas from the time of Romulus Rome had grown and prospered by successively incorporating conquered peoples as citizens. Claudius subsequently emphasizes that the Roman state was the product of successive innovations that in turn became precedents for further innovations in a process of invigorating change.⁴³

Tacitus' version of Claudius' speech, polished in Tacitean style, is a fictionalized reconstruction. By a unique stroke of luck most of Claudius' own official version of the speech is preserved in a long bronze inscription from the Gallic city of Lugdunum (Lyons), the city where Claudius was born when his father Germanicus was a legionary commander there.⁴⁴ Tacitus gives greater emphasis than Claudius' version does to the strength that Rome had derived from successively incorporating conquered peoples. Only the second part of Tacitus' version stresses the evolution of the Roman state through constant innovation, which had been the main focus of Claudius' version from the beginning.⁴⁵

The issue of granting citizenship to barbarian captives is itself an example of how the scriptwriters modified the historical record in order to create a comprehensible and engaging story. The settling of defeated Germans, sometimes even as Roman citizens, had occurred under Aurelius, and, long before he died. Commodus had also allowed some to settle on vacant Roman territory.⁴⁶ If there was any senatorial opposition to this policy, it was not recorded. Ironically, however, and contrary to the film, the attempt to settle Germanic tribesmen in Italy itself was a failure. Marcus expelled the settlers in Italy after some had rebelled and seized control of Ravenna.⁴⁷ For long after, neither he nor any of his successors tried that experiment again.

⁴³ Tacitus, *Annals* 11.24.

⁴⁴ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)* 13.1668.

⁴⁵ On this see especially Miriam T. Griffin, "The Lyons Tablet and Tacitean Hindsight," *The Classical Quarterly*, 32 (1982), 404–418. As a senator from either Narbonese or Cisalpine Gaul, Tacitus certainly had his own reason to emphasize the theme that Rome had benefited greatly from extending citizenship to conquered peoples, but that idea was inherent in Claudius' version and not such a radical change as Griffin indicates. Alexander Benenson argued this last point in "The Speech that Defined an Empire: A Reexamination of Claudius' Speech to the Senate in AD 48," a paper presented to the Classical Association of Connecticut on October 20, 2007.

⁴⁶ Dio 71/72.19.1, 21 and 72/73.3.2–3; *HA Marc.* 22.2.

⁴⁷ Dio 71/73.11.5. Mann himself was aware of such historical facts but ignored them in his film; cf. Mann, "Empire Demolition."

These inconvenient facts conflict with the ideals that *The Fall of the Roman Empire* wants to promote. Still, ignoring them here and having Commodus commit unjustified outrages on the new Germanic citizens, with hints at seriously negative consequences, serves a good historical purpose, for it allows the scriptwriters to allude to future historical events which would severely weaken the empire. In the fourth century, under Emperor Valens, thousands of Goths were granted permission to settle on lands inside the empire. They were so badly treated and abused that they took up arms and inflicted a disastrous defeat on Valens at Adrianople in 378. The Roman army was so desperate for manpower afterwards that Valens' successors began to allow German tribes to settle *en bloc* as autonomous federate allies within imperial territory. Thus the fate of the Roman Empire, particularly in the West, was more and more in the hands of powerful German commanders.⁴⁸

Combining the separate historical events of Commodus' return to Rome as emperor and the triumph he held shortly thereafter makes eminent sense in terms of saving both narrative time and the effort and expense of filming them separately.⁴⁹ Similarly, the famine that occurred in Rome under Commodus in 190 is greatly simplified to suit the plot. Its purpose is to show the benefits of accepting the captive Germans, who relieve the famine, and the tyrannical meanness of Commodus, who orders them destroyed because he can think only of his rival Livius' political profit from their kindness to the people of Rome. The three main ancient sources differ on many specific details, but it is clear that someone manipulated the famine as part of a struggle for power. It resulted in the downfall and death of the historical Cleander, Commodus' powerful chamberlain, on whom the film's Cleander is partly based.⁵⁰ The confusion of the sources justifies simplification, but Cleander's survival as Commodus' chief henchman until Lucilla's and Livius' attempted coup is thwarted just before Commodus' death strays far from the facts. The historical Cleander fell over two years before Commodus was killed. (More on Cleander below.) A major historical problem in the film, however, is that under Commodus there was no rebellion in the eastern part of the empire although there were revolts in Britain, Germany, and

⁴⁸ Cf. Peter Heather, "The Western Empire, 425–76," in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–32, at 18–32 (section entitled "The Fall of the Western Empire").

⁴⁹ *HA Comm.* 3.6, Herodian 1.7.6.

⁵⁰ Dio 72/73.13.1–6, Herodian 1.12.3–13.6, *HA Comm.* 14.1–2.

Dacia.⁵¹ A certain Julius Alexander at Emesa was accused of plotting a rebellion and committed suicide while trying to escape to Parthia, but that is hardly commensurate with what occurs in the film.⁵²

That Rome's enemy on the eastern frontier in AD 180 is identified as Persia instead of Parthia seems to be an even bigger problem, but that change is justifiable. To most viewers Persia, made infamous as the foe of the Greeks by Herodotus, would have been much more familiar as an ancient oriental empire and enemy of the West. Even the *Historia Augusta* anachronistically refers to Aurelius negotiating with Persian kings and ambassadors.⁵³ Only fifty years after Aurelius' death a revived Persian empire actually would supplant Parthia in the East and as Rome's chief rival over the next 350 years would contribute to the empire's demise, a fact which the film tries to explain.

Although many of the historical liberties taken in *Fall of the Roman Empire* are justifiable, or at least understandable in terms of what the filmmakers were trying to do, some inaccuracies seem unnecessary and careless. In making a historically inspired film in the face of deadlines and budgetary constraints, it must be tempting to think that facts of history are not as important as "the feeling of history."⁵⁴ There are moments, however, when hewing to the historical facts would not have consumed unnecessary time or money and would have resulted in a historically more accurate and often dramatically more satisfying film. For example, the political and military organization of the Roman Empire is represented too simplistically. Showing the empire and its armed forces as a collection of provinces and allies, with different nationalities commanded by various Roman governors or allied rulers, serves to promote the film's modern liberal internationalism, but a more accurate representation could have achieved the same goal.

In the time of Marcus Aurelius provincial governors did not travel beyond the confines of their provinces to bring contingents of troops to the emperor. Their duties required them to remain within their provinces. The Roman troops collected for Aurelius' planned attack against the Quadi and Marcomanni in the late winter or early spring of 180 were detachments from the many legions already stationed in the Danube provinces, but none of their names or provincial postings is mentioned in the film. Most of the soldiers in these legions would have been recruited from the Roman citizens of Italy and the heavily Romanized provinces

⁵¹ *HA Comm.* 13.5.

⁵² For Julius of Emesa see *HA Comm.* 8.3 and Dio 72/73.14.1-3.

⁵³ *HA Marc.* 26.1.

⁵⁴ The quotation is from Mann, "Empire Demolition."

of Gaul and Spain and from the Danube provinces themselves.⁵⁵ Auxiliary units recruited from various allies and non-Roman provincials, all commanded by Roman prefects and tribunes, served alongside these legions of Roman citizens.⁵⁶ The same message of diverse nations united in the defense of one civilization and the pursuit of peace could easily have been conveyed by a review of both legionary and auxiliary contingents, with mention of their varied geographical and ethnic origins. Closer attention to historical accuracy along these lines would have eliminated such absurdities as “Mithridates, King of Petra,” “Costobocus, King of Theomnia,” and “Pericles, proconsul of Athens.”

While the portrayal of Roman arms and armor seems to be carefully detailed, the types of military forces and the way in which they fought are poorly represented. Too much prominence is given to the cavalry. In Marcus Aurelius' time the Roman army was overwhelmingly an infantry force that did not, as in the film's first battle, march into forests to engage the enemy under conditions in which massed ranks of infantry could not be deployed, with smaller cavalry units protecting their flanks. That battle seems to draw more upon Arminius' ambush of Quinctilius Varus and his three legions as they were marching through the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 than upon the kind of battles that Marcus Aurelius' troops fought. Later, when the Romans face the rebellious armies and the Persians in the East, the Roman infantry charge is too haphazard and disorganized, and the whole sequence owes more to the conventions of Hollywood Westerns than to Roman warfare.⁵⁷

One of the most implausible episodes occurs when Commodus as Rome's new god steps forth from the giant hand of Sabazius. The historical Commodus did crave divine honors at the end of his life, and the subservient senate obliged him, but most of the time he portrayed himself as one of the most popular of Greco-Roman gods, Jupiter's son Hercules.⁵⁸ There is no hint that Commodus was ever involved with the cult of Sabazius. It would have been more appropriate, then, to have had him outfitted with the lion skin and club of Hercules and stepping forth from a giant statue of Jupiter or a giant club standing upright under the hand of a huge statue of Hercules. Many statues and coin portraits of Com-

⁵⁵ On this see Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 208–209, and Mark Hassall, “The Army,” in Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Dominic Rathbone (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed.; vol. 11: *The High Empire, AD 70–192* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 320–343, at 331.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hassall, “The Army,” 332–336.

⁵⁷ So Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 150.

⁵⁸ Dio 72/73.15.1–16.1, 17.3–4, 19.4, 23.2; *HA Comm.* 8.5, 9.2; Herodian 1.14.8–9.

modus in the guise of Hercules survive, and he even had the colossal statue that stood near the Colosseum and gave it its common name redone to look like him.⁵⁹ In the film Commodus does something comparable to the statue of Jupiter. On the other hand, if the filmmakers wished to allude to the growth of Eastern mystery cults that were to characterize the declining Roman Empire, as the hand of Sabazius suggests they did, they could have kept closer to the ancient sources by including some references in the dialogue to Commodus' growing interest in such cults. They also could have had him step forth from a statue associated with the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris. Commodus took part in the rites of this goddess, particularly in those that involved the dog- or jackal-headed god Anubis, who was a judge of the dead along with Osiris. Anubis in turn was identified with Mercury (Hermes), conductor of souls to the underworld, whom Commodus liked to imitate, too.⁶⁰

Many other historical liberties taken with Commodus' role also seem unnecessary and could have been avoided without affecting what the filmmakers were trying to do. While Christopher Plummer gives a powerful performance as a slightly off-balance, mercurial, and ruthless Commodus, he was too old for the part. Commodus was just over half Plummer's age when he succeeded Marcus Aurelius at eighteen and a half in March 180. The problem of young emperors inheriting the throne before they had established their own identities and earned widespread respect through their own achievements was not new. The reigns of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian had demonstrated this only too well. It would continue to bedevil the empire during the next four hundred years. Commodus' reign was no exception. True, as Livius points out in the film, Commodus was already co-emperor with his father in 180. He had been with his father during the bitter military campaigns of 172–174 on the northern frontiers. He had received the toga of manhood in 175 shortly after his fourteenth birthday in order to rule out any doubts about the succession and to prevent any other attempt like Avidius Cassius' to seize the throne when it was thought that Aurelius was dying

⁵⁹ For the colossal statue, no longer extant, see Dio 72/73.22.3, *HA Comm.* 17.9–10, and Herodian 1.15.9. An impressive marble sculpture showing Commodus from the waist up in the guise of Hercules now resides in the Museo dei Conservatori in Rome. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, Plate 20, reproduces a coin with the profile of Commodus as Hercules. On Commodus' coinage during his last years and on this period in general cf. A. R. Birley, "Hadrian to the Antonines," in *The High Empire*, 132–194, at 190–192; Anthony R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*, 2nd ed. (1988; rpt. London: Routledge, 1999), 82.

⁶⁰ Dio 72/73.17.3–4, 19.4; *HA Comm.* 9.4–6.

or already dead. After Cassius' revolt Commodus had accompanied his father and mother on the tour of the eastern provinces to secure their loyalty. In late 176, shortly after his fifteenth birthday, he was hailed as *imperator*, shared a triumph with his father for victories in the north, and had received the consulship for 177. The other powers and titles that made him co-emperor followed upon his entry to that office. In August 178 Marcus and Commodus had returned to the north to renew the wars interrupted in 175.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Commodus' training was not yet completed, and Aurelius left Commodus under the tutelage of loyal and experienced men to guide him.⁶²

Nowhere in the film is there any indication of Commodus' youth, the problem it posed for the empire, and Aurelius' attempts to make up for it. Rather, a mature-looking Commodus, the age-mate of Stephen Boyd's equally mature Livius, suddenly arrives from Rome to find that his father does not wish him to inherit the throne. An actor in his mid-twenties, who could have been made to look a little younger in the beginning and a little older and more dissipated at the end, could have made for a realistic Commodus.

Christopher Plummer does not resemble Commodus in other crucial aspects. He has short, dark, and straight hair, wears a thin beard like a stereotypical movie villain, is of medium build, and fights with his right hand. Most ancient sources and surviving portraits, however, represent Commodus as sporting thick and curly blond hair (perhaps enhanced with gold dust), having a well-proportioned physique good enough to allow him to equate himself with Hercules, and proud of his skill as a left-handed fighter.⁶³ The *Augustan History* claims that he actually dyed his hair in addition to enhancing its shine with gold dust; it also downplays his feats of strength, but these passages seem to reflect more malice than truth.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Commodus does seem to have developed a hernia or hydrocele at some point.⁶⁵

The depiction of Commodus fighting right-handed with javelins in single combat with Livius at the end seems entirely, wrong. He was a skilled wielder of javelins against animals, but against human

⁶¹ Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 174–182, 188–197, and 207–210.

⁶² Dio 73/72.1.2, *HA Marc.* 28.4–6, Herodian 1.3.1–4.6. Cf. Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 57–58.

⁶³ Herodian 1.7.5–6 and 17.12; Dio 72/73.16.1, 19.2, 22.3; *HA Comm.* 11.10–12, 12.8–12.

⁶⁴ *HA Comm.* 13.1 and 17.3.

⁶⁵ Dio 74.2.2, *HA Comm.* 13.1.

opponents he always fought as a gladiator.⁶⁶ His obsession with being a gladiator is documented to a far greater extent than *The Fall of the Roman Empire* indicates.⁶⁷ As a gladiator Commodus always appeared as a *secutor*, a “pursuer.”⁶⁸ A *secutor* wore a bullet-shaped helmet that had a brief flared collar around the neck, a metal ridge crest from front to back on top, and two round eyeholes. He wore only a loincloth, a padded linen sleeve on the sword arm, a leather gaiter on the corresponding lower leg, and linen padding wrapped around the opposite lower leg. In one hand he carried a *gladius*, the typical Roman short thrusting sword, and in the other a *scutum*, the standard curved oblong infantry shield. This equipment was specifically designed to be used against a *retiarius*, a “net man.” A *retiarius* wore no helmet, carried no shield, had a bare torso, wore gaiters on both legs, and covered his weapon arm with linen padding topped by an upswept metal guard at the shoulder. He was armed with a *pugio*, a long straight dagger, and a trident for stabbing his opponent, and he carried a wide-meshed net about ten feet in diameter, with which he would try to immobilize his foe.⁶⁹ Commodus fighting as a left-handed *secutor* against Livius armed as a *retiarius* would have given viewers a far more historical picture of Commodus.

Commodus’ death and its aftermath are also completely unhistorical. Conspirators had Commodus strangled to death by his wrestling partner after failing to poison him. He was immediately and unproblematically succeeded by Pertinax, who seems to have been privy to the plot.⁷⁰ In keeping with these facts an even more dramatic ending could have been contrived. Commodus wins the fight with Livius and condemns him to be burned with the captive German villagers; then fellow conspirators of Livius in the palace strangle the drunken victor and manage to rescue Livius and his beloved from the flames in the nick of time. The filmmakers could still be granted the time-saving license to skip over the all-too-brief reign of Pertinax and make a larger historical point with the virtual

⁶⁶ Dio 72/73.18.1–19.1, *HA Comm.* 13.2–3, Herodian 1.15.1–6.

⁶⁷ Dio 72/73.17.2–22.4; *HA Comm.* 12.10–11, 15.5; Herodian, 1.15.7–9.

⁶⁸ Dio 72/73.19.2 and 22.3, *HA Comm.* 15.8.

⁶⁹ Marcus Junkelmann, “*Familia Gladiatoria*: The Heroes of the Amphitheatre,” in Eckart Köhne and Cornelia Ewigleben (eds.), *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, English ed. by Ralph Johnson; tr. Anthea Bell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31–74, provides detailed descriptions and illustrations of the various types of gladiators.

⁷⁰ Dio 72/73.22.4–5, 74.1; *HA Comm.* 17.1–2 and *Pert.* 4.4–5; Herodian 1.17.2–11.2.1.3.

purchase of the throne by the infamous Didius Julianus after the assassination of Pertinax.⁷¹

The Fall of the Roman Empire deserves praise for accurately portraying the tyrannical megalomania that seems to have characterized the last part of Commodus' life. The senate heaps upon Commodus many of the honors mentioned in Cassius Dio and the *Augustan History*. He is called *Pius* ("Dutiful"), *Felix* ("Fortunate"), and "Roman Hercules." Rome is renamed *Commodiana* after Commodus himself. Commodus' proclamation of a new Golden Age also reflects the ancient sources, which report that the senate had voted to recognize his time as Rome's Golden Age.⁷² Commodus' threat to destroy his own people mirrors the ancient story that he once wanted to destroy the people of Rome in the amphitheater and burn the city.⁷³ Even his demand for human sacrifices recalls the ancient charge that Commodus had polluted the rites of Mithra with real murder.⁷⁴

On the other hand, since the film puts great emphasis on Commodus, it would have been worthwhile to have shown more of the personal and political relationships and interactions that help explain his murderous career and obsession with obtaining public adulation in the arena. Both the film's principal and secondary characters would have been more accurate if they had been based primarily on members of Commodus' family and on the council of generals and experienced men whom Aurelius had charged with guiding his son, several of whom were his relatives by marriage. The historical Commodus was married by the time of Aurelius' death. His wife was Bruttia Crispina, and his father-in-law, Bruttius Praesens, was one of those experienced men charged with his guidance.⁷⁵ Within two or three years of ascending the throne, however, Commodus executed Crispina on a charge of adultery.⁷⁶ As the disap-

⁷¹ Dio 74.11, *HA Did. Jul.* 2.6–7, Herodian 2.6.4–13. Alan Appelbaum, "Another Look at the Assassination of Pertinax and the Accession of Julianus," *Classical Philology*, 102 (2007), 198–207, makes it clear that the commonly accepted story that the Praetorian Guard auctioned off the throne is not correct. It is true, however, that Julianus obtained the Praetorians' support by pointing out that the man whom they had first backed was the son-in-law of Pertinax, whom some of them had just murdered, and by promising to pay each guardsman 25,000 sesterces, 5,000 more than the other man had promised.

⁷² Dio 72/73.151–6, *HA Comm.* 8.1–9.3 and 14.3.

⁷³ *HA Comm.* 15.6–7.

⁷⁴ *HA Comm.* 9.6.

⁷⁵ Dio 71/72.33.1; *HA Marc.* 27.8, Herodian 1.8.4. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 56 and 206–207. In general see Werner Eck, "The Emperor and His Advisers," in *The High Empire*, 195–213.

⁷⁶ Dio 72/73.4.6, *HA Comm.* 5.9.

pearance of her father from the historical record suggests, behind that charge surely lay the maneuvers and plots of family members, advisors, and ministers who had either turned against Commodus or were using him to advance their own ambitions.⁷⁷ Commodus even took Marcia, the mistress of one of the plotters against him, as his own, and she ultimately played a major role in his assassination.⁷⁸ Presumably she is represented in the film by the tall, slender blonde briefly seen accompanying him on two occasions.

A prime example of others who plotted against Commodus is his own sister Lucilla. The real Lucilla, however, bears little resemblance to the character played by Sophia Loren. Instead of being a never-married woman who had once considered taking the vows of a Vestal Virgin, as she is depicted at the start of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Lucilla had already lost a husband, Aurelius' co-emperor Lucius Verus, and seems to have acquired a bad reputation.⁷⁹ After his death in 169 she had been quickly remarried to one of Aurelius' principal advisors, Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus. She had one surviving child from her previous marriage, a now-adult daughter, and she had borne Pompeianus a son, Aurelius Claudius Pompeianus, who was about four years old in AD 180.⁸⁰ Unlike the loving daughter who dutifully accepts an unwanted but politically essential marriage in the film, Lucilla had bitterly resented marrying Pompeianus, whom both she and her mother had considered beneath her because of his lower social origin as a provincial of equestrian rank from Antioch.⁸¹ Lucilla, her daughter, and her son-in-law were all at the center of a plot to kill Commodus in 182. They may have been among those who were disappointed that he had abandoned his father's conquests in the north, which many of Aurelius' relatives and old advisors wanted Commodus to pursue. They hoped to replace him with his kinsman Marcus Ummidius Quadratus. He was reputed to have been Lucilla's lover, and she may have hoped to become his empress. The plot failed, however. All the conspirators, including Lucilla, were soon executed, so she was dead during most of the period covered in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.⁸²

⁷⁷ Cf. Birley, "Hadrian to the Antonines," 186–190.

⁷⁸ Dio 72/73.4.6 and 22.4–5; *HA Comm.* 11.9, 17.1; Herodian 1.16.4 and 17.2–11, 2.1.3.

⁷⁹ *HA Marc.* 9.4–6 and *Verus* 2.4; Dio 72/73.4.5, Herodian 1.8.3–4.

⁸⁰ On Lucilla and her marriage see Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 196 and 247 (Appendix F, no. 4).

⁸¹ *HA Marc.* 20.6–7.

⁸² Dio 72/73.4.4–5, Herodian 1.8.4–6, *HA Comm.* 4.1–4 and 5.7. See Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 60–61, and "Hadrian to the Antonines," 186–187.

Its fictional hero Gaius Metellus Livius, however, is more realistic than Lucilla and could, with a few adjustments, have fitted the historical context of the film quite nicely. First, his name would have to be rearranged. “Livius” was a Roman *cognomen* and would have been the second of his three names, while “Metellus” was a *cognomen* that would have been the last. As Gaius Livius Metellus, our hero should have been generally called Metellus, and to his lover and close friends he probably would have been Gaius. Despite his faulty name Livius does resemble the talented men of non-senatorial origin whom Aurelius recruited and promoted in service to the empire.⁸³ Appearing to be in his mid-thirties, he would have been the right age to be a legionary commander but not, as in the film, commander of the whole northern army. The Praetorian Prefect Taruttienus Paternus, the senior prefect of the Praetorian Guard, was probably the commander in the north at the time of Aurelius’ death.⁸⁴ So Livius could have been one of those chosen to advise Commodus instead of a man whom Aurelius unhistorically wants to supplant Commodus as his heir. As emperor, Commodus could have made his old friend senior commander in the north when he, and probably Paternus, returned to Rome some months later.⁸⁵

Timonides, too, is a fictional character who resembles a class of people associated with the historical Marcus Aurelius, in this case various men of letters and philosophers whom Marcus admired.⁸⁶ The best known is his teacher of rhetoric, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, a senator who had been born at Cirta in Numidia and whose correspondence with Marcus came to light in the early nineteenth century.⁸⁷ Many of them, such as Claudius Maximus and Quintus Junius Rusticus, were strong adherents of Stoic philosophy. Like Timonides, several were Greeks in the mold of the famous former slave Epictetus, the quintessential Stoic, whose *Discourses* or *Dissertations* had made a great impression on Marcus when Rusticus had given him a copy.⁸⁸ Three of Marcus’ Greek mentors in philosophy were Claudius Severus from Paphlagonia, Sextus of Chaeronea, nephew of the biographer Plutarch, and Apollonius of Chalcedon, a famous Stoic

⁸³ Cf. Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 37–39. In general see Werner Eck, “Emperor, Senate and Magistrates,” in *The High Empire*, 214–237.

⁸⁴ Cf. Hassall, “The Army,” 325, and Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 207.

⁸⁵ For the date see Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 59. By long-standing precedent the Praetorian Prefect should have been at the emperor’s side; cf. Eck, “The Emperor and His Advisers,” 198.

⁸⁶ On Marcus’ intellectual environment see especially Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 69–115 (chapters entitled “The Education of an Heir Apparent” and “The Stoic Prince”).

⁸⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 1.11; cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 25.

⁸⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.7 and 17.

whom Antoninus Pius had summoned to Rome expressly to instruct young Marcus and whose emphasis on reason and refusal to give in to pain closely resemble Timonides' beliefs.⁸⁹ That Timonides, a freed Greek slave, could have risen to become a close member of an emperor's inner circle is not unprecedented. The Greek freedman Lucius Aurelius Nico-medes, former tutor of Aurelius' co-emperor Lucius Verus, became a procurator of equestrian rank and a minister of transport (*praefectus vehiculorum*); he accompanied Verus to Syria as a member of his inner circle.⁹⁰ Thus the roles of Timonides and Livius are quite compatible with what is known about Aurelius' time.

It is also historically plausible that Livius' love interest would be a sister of Commodus, but she would be Cornificia rather than Lucilla. One scholar has even weighed the possibility that she was the one responsible for preserving her father's *Meditations*, the role assigned to Lucilla in the film.⁹¹ Born in 160, Cornificia was a year or two older than Commodus.⁹² As a girl of twelve or thirteen she could easily have developed a crush on Livius, who would have been a handsome young officer in his mid-twenties at that time and who could well have hoped that he might earn enough favor with the emperor to be chosen for her husband when she reached the marriageable age of fourteen or fifteen. At the time the film begins, however, any such hopes would have been dashed. Historically, Aurelius had arranged her marriage at about fourteen to the well-connected Marcus Petronius Sura Mamertinus, a kinsman of Fronto and grandson or grand-nephew of Antoninus Pius' Praetorian Prefect Marcus Petronius Mamertinus.⁹³ She and her husband could easily have been at Aurelius' winter camp in 180.⁹⁴ There the two thwarted lovers could meet again, only to find it necessary to remain chastely apart, as Lucilla and Livius do.

From here a historically more accurate film would proceed much as *The Fall of the Roman Empire* does, but with the addition of the plot sparked by disillusionment over Commodus' rule and without either Sohamus as a central character or an eastern rebellion. Instead, Livius

⁸⁹ Cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 1.8, 9, and 14. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 94–97.

⁹⁰ *HA Verus* 2.9; cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 90 and 125.

⁹¹ Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 212.

⁹² Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 247–248 (Appendix F, no. 9).

⁹³ On these two cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 60 and 182, and "Hadrian to the Antonines," 169–170.

⁹⁴ Her two brothers-in-law were among the friends and kinsmen attendant upon Aurelius in the winter of 180, and there is no known reason why Cornificia's husband could not have been there also. Cf. Eck, "The Emperor and His Advisers," 207.

(or, more accurately, Metellus) is recalled from the Danube frontier to help quell the insurrection that Pertinax faced in Britain in 188.⁹⁵ Upon returning to Italy afterwards, the victor finds the appalling conditions shown in the film, with the addition that Cornificia is now free to be united with him after Commodus has murdered her husband and son, as historically happened, in yet another purge after the downfall of the evil character Cleander.⁹⁶ The two lovers then resolve to overthrow Commodus, who is doing so much damage to Rome that the Parthians, not the Persians, will be emboldened to attack if the two of them do not rescue Rome from Commodus.

Except as a sinister and evil man, the Cleander of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* bears little resemblance to the historical Cleander. In a more accurate film Cleander could be a composite of the various men who tried to enhance their own power by catering to Commodus. Cleander was originally a slave in service to Commodus and later became one of his freedmen chamberlains. Thereafter he ruthlessly eliminated officials more senior than himself until he became Praetorian Prefect and largely controlled access to important political posts. He was overthrown a year or two before Commodus' death.⁹⁷ With Cleander dead at the historically appropriate moment, the fictional Verulus could become the one who collects the gold that Commodus uses to subvert the hero's army. Verulus' role would need no other alteration. The ancient charge that Commodus was the child of an adulterous relationship between Faustina and a gladiator permits the invention of Verulus. Moreover, his depiction well fits the historical facts. He appropriately appears as Commodus' personal gladiatorial trainer and commander of a troop of gladiators brought north to fight alongside regular legionaries against the barbarians. War and plague had so far reduced Roman manpower that Aurelius resorted to pressing even gladiators into service against the Germanic tribes.⁹⁸

Even the film's German leader, Ballomar, is based on a historically documented figure. According to Cassius Dio there was a king of the Marcomanni by the name of Ballomarior, who with the leaders of ten other tribes had sued for peace after a disastrous defeat. That defeat must have occurred in 166 or 167, before Aurelius himself had begun to fight on the northern frontier.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, it is historically possible that

⁹⁵ *HA Pert.* 3.5–10, Dio 72/73.9.2 and 74.4.1. Cf. Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 77.

⁹⁶ *HA Comm.* 7.1.

⁹⁷ Dio 72/73.9.3–13.6, *HA Comm.* 6.3–7.1, Herodian 1.12.3–13.6.

⁹⁸ *HA Marc.* 21.8–9 and 23.4–6.

⁹⁹ Dio 71/72.3.1; cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 169.

Ballomarios was still active thirteen or fourteen years later, when Marcus was fighting the Marcomanni yet again.

The film's historically most accurate character is Marcus Aurelius himself. The resemblance between Alec Guinness and the many images that have survived from antiquity is almost uncanny. One might think that he had just dismounted from his great bronze statue in Rome's Piazza del Campidoglio or come to life in one of the scenes that spiral up the column commemorating his northern campaigns.¹⁰⁰ Equally impressive is how the film captures the spirit and character revealed in Marcus Aurelius' own *Meditations*. The high-minded speech addressed to the assembled leaders and troops from around the empire reflects the true Aurelius' ideas of human brotherhood, the unity of all people, and Rome as their universal city: "No longer provinces or colonies, but Rome, Rome everywhere, a family of equal nations." This new society will be the result of "golden centuries of peace, a true *pax Romana*."

Aurelius frequently espoused the brotherhood and unity of human beings as part of a universal whole in his *Meditations*:

But for my part, I have long perceived the nature of good and its nobility, the nature of evil and its meanness, and also the nature of the culprit himself, who is my brother (not in the physical sense, but as a fellow creature similarly endowed with reason and a share of the divine) . . . (2.1)¹⁰¹

He [a man habituated to the proper way of thinking] does not forget the brotherhood of all rational beings, nor that a concern for every man is proper to humanity. (3.4)

This is the work of a man who is of the same stock and breed and brotherhood as I am . . . and therefore in accordance with Nature's law of brotherhood I am to deal amiably and fairly with him . . . (3.11)

You are forgetting, too, the closeness of man's brotherhood with his kind; a brotherhood not of blood or human seed, but of common intelligence; and that this intelligence in every man is God, an emanation from the deity. (12.26)

Aurelius often expressed human brotherhood in terms of sharing a common city and citizenship:

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 84–85, and Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, Plates 10, 16, 18, 23 (the equestrian statue), 27–28, 30–38, and 266–267 (Appendix 5).

¹⁰¹ This and all subsequent quotations from the *Meditations* are taken from Staniforth, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*.

Nothing so enlarges the mind as this ability to examine methodically and accurately every one of life's experiences, with an eye to determining . . . its worth to men as members of that supreme City in which all other cities are as households. (3.11)

So then there is a world-law; which in turn means that we are all fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city. (4.4)

O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony . . . O Nature, all that thy seasons yield is fruit for me. From thee, and in thee, and to thee are all things. 'Dear city of God!' may we not cry, even as the poet cried 'Dear city of Cecrops!' (4.23)

Whether a man's lot be cast in this place or in that matters nothing, provided that in all places he views the world as a city and himself its citizen. (10.15)

O man, citizenship of this great world-city has been yours. Whether for five years or five score what is it to you? Whatever the law of that city decrees is fair to one and all alike. (12.36)

He saw Rome as similar to, if not synonymous with, that world-city:

My own nature is a rational and civic one; I have a city, and I have a country; as Marcus, I have Rome, and as a human being, I have the universe; and consequently, what is beneficial to these communities is the sole good for me. (6.44)

As ruler of the city that in turn ruled the largest portion of the then-known inhabited world, Aurelius conceived of this world as "a community based on equality and freedom of speech for all, and a monarchy concerned primarily to uphold the liberty of the subject" (1.14).

The film also rightly stresses Marcus' empathy and compassion when he gently admonishes Lucilla for the hostility that she bears towards her late mother: "We must try to understand people more. Learn to pity. Learn to have compassion." The same qualities shine through in the historical Aurelius' *Meditations*:

I am bound to do good to my fellow creatures and bear with them. (5.20)

But if the city should indeed be harmed, never rage at the culprit: rather, find out at what point his vision failed him. (5.22)

It is man's peculiar distinction to love even those who err and go astray. Such a love is born as soon as you realize that they are your brothers; that

they are stumbling in ignorance, and not willfully; that in a short while both of you will be no more . . . (7.22)

Enter into the ruling principle of your neighbor's mind, and suffer him to enter into yours. (8.61)

Your own mind, the Mind of the universe, your neighbor's mind – be prompt to explore them all . . . Your own . . . ; the universe's . . . ; your neighbor's that you may understand whether it is informed by ignorance or knowledge, and also may recognize that it is kin to your own. (9.22)

When another's fault offends you, turn to yourself and consider what similar shortcomings are found in you. (10.30)

Remember the close bond between myself and the rest of mankind. This obtains because all of us were born for one another . . . (11.18.1)

You have no assurance that they are doing wrong at all, for the motives of men's actions are not always what they seem. There is generally much to learn before any judgment can be pronounced with certainty on another's doings. (11.18.5)

The film's Aurelius follows precepts enunciated in the *Meditations*. Like his historical model he does not let illness distract him from the tasks at hand.¹⁰² When he senses that death is approaching, he philosophically accepts it, just as the author of the *Meditations* counseled.¹⁰³ After Marcus' death Timonides continues to represent his Stoic spirit. When faced with trial by fire in negotiating with Ballomar and the defeated Germans, Timonides refuses to give in to pain and hateful anger. He believes and acts in accordance with several passages in the *Meditations*:

When men are inhuman, take care not to feel towards them as they do towards other humans. (7.65)

If something untoward happens which is within your powers of endurance, do not resent it, but bear it as she [Nature] has enabled you to do. Should it exceed those powers, still do not give way to resentment; for its victory over you will put an end to its own existence. Remember, however, that in fact Nature has given you the ability to bear anything which your own judgment succeeds in declaring bearable and endurable by regarding it as a point of self-interest and duty to do so. (10.3)

Though men may hinder you from following the paths of reason, they can never succeed in deflecting you from sound action; but make sure that

¹⁰² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9.41.

¹⁰³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.33 and 11.3.

they are equally unsuccessful in destroying your charitable feelings towards them. You must defend both positions alike: your firmness in decision and action, and at the same time your gentleness to those who try to obstruct you or otherwise molest you. It would be as great a weakness to give way to your exasperation with them as it would be to abandon your course of action and be browbeaten into surrender. In either event the post of duty is deserted; in the one case through a lack of courage, and in the other through alienation from men who are your natural brothers and friends. (11.9)

Always the kindly schoolmaster, Timonides constantly seeks to instruct and improve, as Aurelius urged in the *Meditations*:

Men exist for each other. Then either improve them, or put up with them. (8.59)

If a man makes a slip, admonish him gently and show him his mistake. If you fail to convince him, blame yourself, or else blame nobody. (10.4)

Teach them better if you can; if not, remember that kindness has been given you for moments like these. (9.11)

Timonides' specific reference to himself as a teacher in the scene in which he addresses the senate echo these precepts of Aurelius. Timonides also constantly invokes logic and reason to effect change for the good, just as the *Meditations* advocate:

When the Nature of all things rational equipped each rational being with his powers, one of the faculties we received from her hand was this, that just as she herself transmutes every obstacle or opposition, fits it into its place in destiny's pattern, and assimilates it into herself, so a rational being has power to turn each hindrance into material for himself and use it to set forward his own endeavours. (8.35)

Reason, too, yields fruit, both for itself and for the world; since from it comes a harvest of other good things, themselves all bearing the stamp of reason. (9.10)

Both Aurelius and his alter ego Timonides, although pagan, seem to embody the virtues of Christian saints. While the *Meditations* provide much support for that portrait, it is sometimes overdrawn. Although the loving and forgiving attitude that Aurelius shows toward his deceased wife in the film is supported by the *Meditations*, it did not prevent the

widowed Marcus from seeking the comforts of a concubine.¹⁰⁴ Neither was he as squeamish about the heads of enemies as the film suggests. Marcus replies to Livius' promise to bring him Ballomar's head: "Please don't. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Bring him to me alive. I want to talk to him." Our sources indicate that Aurelius shrank from looking at the severed head of his old friend, the usurper Avidius Cassius.¹⁰⁵ The head of a fellow Roman and former friend, however, was different from that of a barbarian.¹⁰⁶ Marcus Aurelius' column shows soldiers presenting him with the severed heads of barbarians.¹⁰⁷ Dio even reports that Aurelius offered five hundred gold pieces to whoever brought him the head of Ariogaeus, a chief of the Quadi, although he offered a thousand if the man could be brought in alive.¹⁰⁸

The film's apparently proto-Christian saint was no friend of Christians. While it is true that under Aurelius Christianity had not assumed the powerful role that it would play in Roman history a century or so later, the foundations of its prominence were being laid during his and Commodus' reigns. Whether or not the phrase "as with the Christians" belongs in the text quoted next, it is hard to believe that Aurelius did not have them in mind when he wrote in the *Meditations*:

Happy the soul which, at whatever moment the call comes for release from the body, is equally ready to face extinction, dispersion, or survival. Such preparedness, however, must be the outcome of its own decision; a decision not prompted by mere contumacy, as with the Christians, but formed with deliberation and gravity and, if it is to be convincing to others, with an absence of all heroics. (11.3)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.17; *HA Marc.* 29.10. That practice was entirely acceptable in both pagan Roman and early Christian societies, and even St. Augustine embraced it before his conversion. Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 50–52 and 79–81.

¹⁰⁵ Dio 72/73.28.1, *HA Marc.* 25.2–3 and *Av. Cass.* 8.1.

¹⁰⁶ Caesar is said to have reacted in horror at being shown Pompey's head (Plutarch, *Caesar* 48.2).

¹⁰⁷ Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, Plate 31.

¹⁰⁸ Dio 71/72.14.1–2. From the context it appears that Aurelius wanted the pleasure of personally beheading that troublesome barbarian. Dio's reference to Aurelius' extreme bitterness indicates that in the heat of anger Aurelius wanted Ariogaeus brought in alive so that he could see the troublesome barbarian beheaded in person. If so, Aurelius cooled down enough so that he merely banished the man to Alexandria when he finally was captured.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 262–265 (= no. 9 in "Appendix 4: Christianity," 256–265).

Christians must have come to Aurelius' attention from time to time and occasioned some thoughts. During his lifetime there were some highly visible instances of martyrdom. A group of Christians were martyred during the 150s at Ephesus under proconsul Statius Quadratus, an occurrence that culminated with the spectacular burning of the aged bishop Polycarp. During the same period Ptolemaeus and Lucius were martyred in Rome. In the 160s, when Aurelius was emperor, his old Stoic mentor Junius Rusticus, then Urban Prefect, condemned Justin Martyr and his companions to death in Rome.¹¹⁰ Justin had been living in Rome and was known to the philosophical community to which Aurelius was connected. Justin had engaged in a heated controversy with the Cynic philosopher Crescens, who ultimately sought his condemnation as a Christian.¹¹¹ Finally, if church historian Eusebius is right, a number of martyrs achieved fame during a major persecution at the important provincial capital of Lugdunum in 177, a year or so before Aurelius renewed the northern wars.¹¹² It is highly unlikely that a conscientious emperor like Marcus Aurelius, overseeing the empire from Rome at the time, would not have been kept apprised of major events and disturbances in such an important provincial capital.

It is also highly unlikely that a man of Aurelius' intellectual interests and acquaintances would have been completely unaware of the Christians who were writing major defenses of their faith in the same period. At Rome Justin had written his important *Apology* in the 150s. Melito of Sardis and Athenagoras of Athens each seem to have addressed an *Apology* to Marcus in 176, when he was touring the eastern provinces in the aftermath of Avidius Cassius' revolt and when Christians seem to have been attracting increased hostility.¹¹³ It would be surprising if Aurelius had ever read or listened to these apologies, but it would not be surprising if he had heard of them. It is even more likely that he was

¹¹⁰ Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 260–261 and 265.

¹¹¹ Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 4.16.

¹¹² Eusebius, *History of the Church*, Preface to 5.1, unequivocally dates it to the seventeenth year in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, i.e. AD 177. Some have challenged his accuracy because the event is placed during the joint reign of Marcus and Lucius, which is taken to be that of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (AD 161–169) in Jerome's Latin *Chronicle*, based on Eusebius' Greek original, now lost; cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 261. It could be, however, that in compiling the *Chronicle* either Eusebius or, more likely, Jerome did not realize that a reference in his source dating the event to the joint reign of Marcus and Lucius meant the joint reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Commodus, who became official co-emperors in 177, the very year indicated by Eusebius' *History*.

¹¹³ Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 258–259 (Appendix 4, no. 4); Barbara Levick, "Greece and Asia Minor," in *The High Empire*, 604–634, at 633.

aware of the negative view of Christians that some prominent pagan writers were expressing. The famous contemporary essayist and satirist Lucian of Samosata attacked a one-time Christian, Peregrinus Proteus, in his satiric exposé *On the Death of Peregrinus*. Aurelius' own beloved teacher of rhetoric, Cornelius Fronto, utilized anti-Christian propaganda to smear a man whom he prosecuted in court.¹¹⁴ In addition, Galen, Aurelius' court physician, disparaged Christians along with Jews for relying on religious faith rather than reason and in one passage specifically singled out Christians for "drawing their faith from parables and miracles, and yet some acting in the same way as philosophers."¹¹⁵

The Platonist Celsus may have written his comprehensive attack on Christianity, the *True Discourse*, just a year or two too late for Aurelius to have become aware of it. Nevertheless it shows the serious attention that Christianity had attracted among upper-class intellectuals of Aurelius' day, a group whose interests he clearly shared. Finally, the fourth-century historian Eutropius saw a parallel between Julian the Apostate and Marcus Aurelius as persecutors of Christianity. He said that Julian was "too vigorous a persecutor of the Christians, although to the extent that he abstained from bloodshed, not unlike Marcus [Aurelius] Antoninus, whom he also desired to emulate."¹¹⁶ This passage does not indicate that Julian or Marcus completely abstained from bloodshed – killings of Christians took place under Julian – but it does indicate that they did not actively seek the deaths of Christians.

Therefore it would be appropriate for greater historical authenticity if *The Fall of the Roman Empire* had included a brief scene in which Aurelius and Timonides discuss the growth of Christianity in the context of a request from the Urban Prefect at Rome or some provincial governor for advice on what to do with some prominent people denounced as Christians, a scene perhaps modeled on the famous exchange of letters between Emperor Trajan and his provincial governor Pliny the Younger. Timonides, foreshadowing Constantine 150 years later, argues for leniency on the ground that Christianity has much in common with their own Stoic beliefs and is attracting a growing segment of the population whose support it would be wise to cultivate. Aurelius, however, sees them as dangerous fanatics who are merely indoctrinated, have no rational understanding of life, and are undermining Rome in a time of war and plague by refusing to join the rest of the population in customary demonstrations of loyalty. Therefore, he decrees, the precedent set by Trajan

¹¹⁴ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 263.

¹¹⁵ Quoted from Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 263.

¹¹⁶ Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 10.16.3.

and followed by Hadrian and Antoninus Pius requires that Christians, after a proper accusation and trial, must be executed if they refuse to recant and perform the requisite sacrifices. Such a scene would give greater context and significance to the later moment of the *Chi-Rho* pendant lying on the breast of the dead Timonides. The two scenes together would clearly give the more historical view that Christians were a growing group in the Roman Empire of the second century and that some philosophically schooled Greeks were gradually being won over to the Christian faith, with momentous consequences for the late Roman Empire.

The highest marks for historical accuracy in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* go to its magnificent sets. The Roman winter camp in its opening sequence has rightly been praised as “one of the most atmospheric sets ever used in an historical movie.”¹¹⁷ It was modeled on scenes from Trajan’s Column, which depicted Roman warfare on the same frontier that Aurelius was trying to extend.¹¹⁸ The palisades of heavy, close-set pointed logs and the stout watchtowers of wood and stone behind them also reflect what archaeologists have found along the northern frontiers.¹¹⁹

In keeping with Anthony Mann’s passion for authentic landscapes, the setting on a high promontory overlooking a valley and forests below and mountains in the distance recalls a site high above the River Váh (Waag) where Valerius Maximianus of the Legio II Adiutrix commanded some 850 men at Trenčín in Slovakia during the winter of 279/280.¹²⁰ Historically, however, Marcus Aurelius himself did not die at such an isolated mountain fortress. He spent the winter eighty to a hundred miles south at one of the major river ports on either the Danube or the Save, which were the main supply-and-communication routes to the more settled provinces and to Italy.¹²¹ Nevertheless it makes sense to place him in an isolated setting to give a sense of what kind of country and conditions he and his army faced in trying to conquer the peoples north of the Danube.

¹¹⁷ Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 84.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 86–87 (ills. 51–53).

¹¹⁹ C. Sebastian Sommer, “From Conquered Territory to Roman Province: Recent Discoveries and Debate on the Roman Occupation of SW Germany,” in J. D. Creighton and R. J. A. Wilson (eds.), *Roman Germany: Studies in Cultural Interaction (Journal of Roman Archaeology, supplementary series, 32; Portsmouth, R. I., 1999)*, 160–198, at 186–187, with fig. 6.13.

¹²⁰ Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 209, and “Hadrian to the Antonines,” 184.

¹²¹ The three possibilities are Vindobona (Vienna), Bononia (Vidin), both on the Danube, and Sirmium (Mitrovica) on the Save. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 210; he suggests that Bononia, twenty miles north of Sirmium and on the Danube, may be correct.

The greatest scenic triumph of the *Fall of the Roman Empire* is the set of Rome itself. It is the most accurate full-scale reconstruction of the heart of ancient Rome ever attempted.¹²² There are, however, a few anachronisms. The arches of a huge aqueduct, briefly seen in the background as Commodus begins his procession along the *Via Sacra*, the Sacred Way, through the Forum to the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter upon his triumphal return to Rome, would not have been there in Commodus' day. The only arcaded aqueduct possibly ever visible even briefly from the *Via Sacra* was the great extension built under Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) and restored by Septimius Severus (AD 193–211) to carry the *Aqua Claudia* from the Caelian Hill across a valley to the Palatine. Although it was about 1,100 feet southwest of the start of the *Via Sacra*, it stood about 125 feet high from the lowest point of the valley and might have been visible at the entrance to the Sacred Way above intervening buildings.¹²³ Even if the appearance of an aqueduct in this scene is not historical, it is understandable that the filmmakers wanted to include an image of one of the engineering marvels associated with the greatness of Rome. And it elegantly closes off the set's background.

Less excusable is the inclusion of a much later series of commemorative columns erected along the north side of the *Via Sacra* across from the Basilica Julia in the reign of Diocletian (AD 282–305).¹²⁴ A similar anachronism occurs when Livius returns to Rome from the East. The gates and walls that Emperor Aurelian built around Rome eighty years later and that still stand today appear where no walls of any kind yet existed.¹²⁵ They are, however, well done and can be appreciated as a glimpse of a later historical development in the fall of Rome as the Roman world became less secure in the following century.

In most other respects, the sets of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are meticulous reconstructions of what existed at Commodus' time. The

¹²² On this cf. Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 146–147, and Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 85–86 and fig. 54. Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywood's Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), 274–281, provides a detailed assessment of the set's accuracies and some errors not mentioned below in my discussion of Commodus' triumphal procession through the Forum.

¹²³ Peter J. Aicher, *Guide to the Aqueducts of Ancient Rome* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1995), 51 (map 4.F) and 67–68. The discussion by Samuel Ball Platner, *The Topography and Monuments of Ancient Rome*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1911), 98–99 and fig. 17 (map of Palatine Hill, between pages 128 and 129), is outdated, but his map more clearly lays out the spatial relationships of the ancient streets and monuments.

¹²⁴ Cf. Platner, *The Topography and Monuments of Ancient Rome*, 258–260.

¹²⁵ On this see Platner, *The Topography and Monuments of Ancient Rome*, 64–66 and 117–123.

panoramic shots of the Forum and Capitoline Hill show replicas of not only those buildings and monuments of which significant remains still stand but also many whose traces barely remain visible to the untrained eye. We see the Temple of Julius Caesar reconstructed as well as can be judged, and between it and the Temple of Castor the almost totally obliterated Arch of Augustus reappears. Down the Sacred Way past the recreated Basilica Julia at the western end of the Forum by the restored Temple of Saturn, the similarly obliterated Arch of Tiberius rises again. Up the *Clivus Capitolinus*, the road leading upward to the Capitoline Hill, the Temple of *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus* (Jupiter Best and Greatest) stands forth once more almost as it had been rebuilt under Domitian (AD 81–96): three rows of six massive marble Corinthian columns across the front, golden doors and roof tiles, and statues standing at the corners and apex of the triangular pediment. Only the two doors to the side sanctuaries of Juno and Minerva, the goddesses who with Jupiter formed the Capitoline Triad as patron divinities of Rome, and the sculptures within the pediment itself are missing. Inside, the great gold and ivory statue of Jupiter, correctly modeled on that of Zeus at Olympia, gazes down majestically from a lofty throne. The two rows of splendid superimposed fluted columns flanking the aisle in front of the statue should, however, be solid walls separating Jupiter's central chamber from those of Juno and Minerva on either side.¹²⁶

The richly detailed interiors of other buildings are equally impressive evocations of Rome at its imperial height. One of the rooms in which Livius and Lucilla meet seems directly inspired by the elaborate *trompe l'oeil* architectural frescoes found at Pompeii and Herculaneum: slender columns, shallow arches, elaborate pediments, sculptures, hanging garlands, and urns.¹²⁷ Commodus' palace has elaborately coffered ceilings, brilliant mosaic floors, and multi-colored geometric marble pavements similar to those found in the great houses at Pompeii, the Golden House of Nero, and the Pantheon as rebuilt by Hadrian.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Cf. L. Richardson, Jr., *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 69 (fig. 19) and 121–124.

¹²⁷ On this Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 86 and 90–91 (figs. 57–58). Cf. John B. Ward-Perkins and Amanda Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79: Essay and Catalogue* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 96–104 and 162–164, figs. 117–126.

¹²⁸ Cf. Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 86, and Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 147–148. The latter notes that the palace's wall mosaics depicting athletic scenes are based on floor mosaics from the later Baths of Caracalla and are therefore anachronistic but correctly reflect Commodus' obsession with the arena.

Designers John Moore and Veniero Colasanti deserve greatest praise, however, for correctly portraying the interior of the Senate House, the Roman *Curia*. Most films set in ancient Rome show its inside as it was depicted in a series of late-nineteenth-century frescoes that adorn Rome's Palazzo Madama, seat of today's Italian senate. In those paintings the speaker stands in a circular well and faces semicircular tiers of seats. This totally unhistorical image of the ancient Senate House has been reproduced in so many school textbooks and popular works on Rome that it has been accepted as historically accurate. It was used to represent the Roman senate in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) and in the television series *Rome* (2005, 2007).¹²⁹ The model for the senate chamber in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is the version of the *Curia Iulia* as it was rebuilt under Diocletian after a fire. Although it dates from a century later than Commodus' reign, it is fundamentally a reconstruction of the one that Domitian had rebuilt on the original plan after a previous fire almost a century before Commodus.¹³⁰

This rather modest building could not have accommodated all those who were members of the second-century Roman senate.¹³¹ Nevertheless only a fraction of the membership usually would have been available to attend meetings at any one time. Routine senate meetings never attracted heavy attendance, and the ranked system of debate and voting put most of the decisions in the hands of a relatively small group of senior members. Therefore the *Curia Iulia* must have remained functional for Domitian and Diocletian to have rebuilt it on its original plan after two fires.

As was the chamber of the republican *Curia Hostilia* before it, that of the *Curia Iulia* is rectangular. At the back end there is a dais on which the presiding magistrate sat, and there is a central aisle flanked on both sides by tiers of three low platforms, on which the assembled senators stood or sat. From the time of Augustus until its controversial removal under Emperor Gratian in 381, there also stood, presumably at the back of the chamber, an altar and statue of Victory.¹³² The only jarring note

¹²⁹ Cf. my discussion in "Spartacus: History and Histrionics," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 87–111, at 91.

¹³⁰ On this see Peter Connolly and Hazel Dodge, *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; rpt. 2000), 124–125, with an image of its reconstruction.

¹³¹ So Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 148.

¹³² Cf. Connolly and Dodge, *The Ancient City*, 124.

in the film's depiction of the Senate House is the appearance of the famous Capitoline Wolf where the statue and altar of Victory should have been. The she-wolf, however, seems to have been placed there intentionally, for the Capitoline Wolf is an iconic expression of the virtues of the republic under senatorial leadership that had made Rome great, and it points out the strong contrast with the tyrannical monarchy that has now suppressed the power of the senate and is leading Rome down a path to destruction.¹³³

Altogether, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* stands out as a thoughtful and thought-provoking blend of fact and fiction. Many of the fictions are carefully crafted to compress into a brief compass what could not otherwise be conveyed within a film of viewable length. Some errors of fact or omission seem to be the result of a valid desire to address contemporary issues more than to pursue strict historical accuracy. Others do not serve either purpose and with a little more effort and ingenuity could have been avoided to make an unusually serious and well-done Hollywood epic even better, both dramatically and historically.

¹³³ Cf. Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 149.

Marcus Aurelius: The Empire over Himself

Diskin Clay

Ancient philosophy and philosophers seem to refuse to be captured on film. The Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius was unique as a philosopher king. But when he is projected onto the silver screen, the depth of his philosophy regrettably remains almost uncharted. In his public role as emperor, the last of a series of “good emperors,” he plays an impressive role in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) and again in *Gladiator* (2000). Yet in both films we can detect only faint traces of him as a philosopher. In the earlier film Marcus waxes philosophical at the approach of a death he did not expect to arrive in the form of a poisoned apple, but his philosophy is remote from that of the historical emperor’s *Meditations*. After Marcus’ death in the film his Greek freedman Timonides takes up the emperor’s role as philosopher. Before his death Marcus had entrusted his writings – the “scribblings” we now know as his *Meditations* – to his daughter Lucilla. She deposits them, contained in wooden chests and apparently unread, in the Greek library Emperor Augustus had established on the Palatine Hill. The difficult question of how the emperor’s very private *Meditations* were preserved is solved as such problems can be solved only in Hollywood.

In *Gladiator*, during his last campaign on the northern frontier Marcus dies in an unhistorical strangulation by his son Commodus. Shortly before his death he asks General Maximus: “Will I be known as the

philosopher, the warrior, the tyrant? Or will I be the emperor who gave Rome back her true self?" Returned to Rome as his father's successor, Commodus is pestered by a senator who was justifiably worried about sanitation in Rome. Commodus snaps back that he will not follow Marcus Aurelius' example: "My father spent all his time at study, reading books, learning his philosophy." If we remember that Hercules – or Herakles in Greek – had cleansed the stables of King Augeas on one of his Twelve Labors, the reaction of the "Roman Hercules," as the historical Commodus styled himself, is amusing. Philosophy is no more than Greek to him.

1. Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Prince

To Justin Martyr, a contemporary Christian apologist and later a saint, Marcus Aurelius was known as "The Philosopher."¹ Justin so describes Marcus in his letter of "apology" for Christianity, written after AD 155 and addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius. Strangely enough, Justin also calls Lucius Verus, Marcus' brother by adoption, a "philosopher and lover of culture."² We know that Greek and Roman philosophers were involved in tutoring Marcus and probably Lucius Verus as well, but having a philosopher as a tutor does not make the pupil a philosopher. These teachers are recalled with gratitude in Book 1 of the *Meditations*. The first named is Diognetus, young Marcus' instructor in painting, a man who must have had a deep interest in Greek philosophy. He instilled in Marcus "an affinity for philosophy" and directed him to the lectures of three philosophers we know only from this entry (1.6). He also persuaded his charge to "love the camp-bed, the hide blanket, and all else involved in Greek training." Others involved in Marcus' training were the Stoic Apollonius of Chalcedon (1.8), Plutarch's nephew Sextus (1.9), and Alexander of Seleucia (1.12), a Platonist nicknamed "the Clay Plato," who will be Marcus' Greek secretary during his campaigns in Pannonia on the northern frontier.

Remarkably, Romans also played a role in the education of the Stoic prince. First named is the Stoic Quintus Junius Rusticus (1.7). Rusticus

¹ All translations of the *Meditations* are taken from of Martin Hammond, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations* (London: Penguin, 2006). References to the *Meditations* are by book and paragraph.

² Marcus is also called "the philosopher" at the beginning of the surviving epitome of Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 71.1. For the verdict of Herodian, *History of Rome from the Death of Marcus Aurelius* 1.2.4, see the excerpts from this historian elsewhere in the present book.

dissuaded his charge from the study of rhetoric, much to the dismay of Marcus Cornelius Fronto, young Marcus' tutor in Latin rhetoric. Rusticus introduced Marcus to the *Discourses* of the philosopher Epictetus, a book that made a lasting impression on the future author of the *Meditations*. Marcus also acknowledges his debt to the Stoic Catulus (1.13) and to the politician Severus for bringing him to appreciate the heroic opponents of imperial absolutism: Thrasea, Helvidius, Cato, Dio, and Brutus (1.14).³ Lastly he names the Stoic senator Claudius Maximus, who as proconsul in Africa heard the case of Apuleius of Madaurus, the Platonist and author of *The Golden Ass*, around 155. From Antoninus Pius, his adoptive father, Marcus learned to respect true philosophers but to tolerate those who only made a pretense of philosophy (1.16.5).

Surely Marcus' tutor, friend, and older contemporary Fronto (barely acknowledged in 1.11) was well aware of the Stoic prince's commitment to philosophy. Fronto's attitude to the young Marcus' devotion to Greek philosophy in preference to Roman rhetoric is revealed in their long correspondence, discovered only in 1815. Fronto emphasized the importance of Latin rhetoric for a Roman statesman and in several letters praised drafts of the speeches Marcus was planning to give before the Roman senate. This was Fronto's diplomatic way of returning his pupil to the study of rhetoric. Fronto comes as close to philosophy as he ever does in his remarkable correspondence with Marcus when he writes him a letter in Greek, in which he plays the role of Lysias' "non-lover" in Plato's *Phaedrus* to young Marcus, who is cast in and enthusiastically plays the role of the young Phaedrus.⁴ We will return to this correspondence when we assess what counted as "philosophy" in the age of the emperors Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. As we

³ Thrasea Paetus was a senator, Stoic philosopher, and critic of Nero; he was condemned to death by the senate. His son-in-law, Helvidius Priscus, was executed by Emperor Vespasian. Cato the Younger (Cato of Utica) had famously committed suicide when Julius Caesar's power was beginning to be absolute. The orator Dio of Prusa (Dio Chrysostom) was banished by Emperor Domitian, Vespasian's son. Brutus was one of the conspirators against Julius Caesar. Marcus does not name them in chronological order. On their significance for Marcus' conception of himself as emperor see the note on this passage by Hammond, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*, 128. I identify Marcus' Dio not with Plato's associate Dion of Syracuse but with Dio Chrysostom, who in Rome was deeply impressed by the Stoic Musonius Rufus, "the Roman Socrates," as was his follower Epictetus.

⁴ A good example of Fronto's advocacy and display of both Greek and Latin rhetoric can be found in a letter of AD 143; see C. R. Haines (ed. and tr.), *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto with Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Lucius Verus, and Various Friends*, 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919–1920; rpt. 1988), vol. 1, 104–107. Fronto plays the role of Lysias' non-lover in a letter perhaps of 139, when Marcus was eighteen; Marcus replies in Latin (Haines, vol. 1, 20–33).

approach Marcus' philosophy, we should also note his final expression of gratitude to the gods: "for all my love of philosophy, I did not fall in with any sophist, or devote my time to the analysis of literature or logic, or busy myself with cosmic speculation" (1.17.9).

The *Meditations* reveal Marcus as a philosopher but not unmistakably as a Stoic. They were unknown to his contemporaries because they were entries in a journal he maintained probably over the last ten years of his life.⁵ How they survived and were eventually copied in the tenth century is a murky history. It is inconceivable that his son Commodus would have had the filial devotion or foresight to preserve them, although he must have taken some part in the decision to put up the huge column commemorating his father's northern campaigns that now dominates the Piazza Colonna in Rome. Perhaps Alexander, the Clay Plato, had a role in the preservation of the *Meditations* after the emperor's death, for Marcus records his gratitude to him (1.12). We will never know. A similar question arises about the correspondence of Fronto. The most likely person to have preserved and reproduced it after his death is Fronto's son-in-law, Aufidius Victorinus.⁶

2. Marcus' Philosophy as Seen from the Outside World

Marcus Aurelius was the only Roman emperor who was also a philosopher. Hadrian admired the Greek philosophers Heliodorus and Epictetus and is said to have exchanged pamphlets with philosophers and poets. Epictetus had been exiled from Rome along with other philosophers by Emperor Domitian in AD 89.⁷ His house in Epirus on the coast of present-day Albania became a site of pilgrimage. Like his model Socrates, Epictetus did not put his philosophy into writing. But he attracted the historian Arrian, who copied the *Discourses* Epictetus delivered in Epirus. (They

⁵ The two entries at the head of Books 2 and 3 of the *Meditations* – "Written among the Quadi on the River Gran" (the Hron in Slovenia) and "Written at Cornuntum" (Hainsburg, Austria) – seem to date the beginnings of this philosophical journal to the 170s at the beginning of the German wars.

⁶ This is the plausible conjecture of Haines, *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto* . . . vol. 1, xxi.

⁷ *HA Hadr.* 15.16 and 16.10. The *Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*, abbreviated HA) is a series of biographies of the emperors, their intended successors, and usurpers from 117–284. The collection is sometimes referred to as *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, since six different authors are identified as being responsible for these lives. The consensus now is that they were written by a single author after 360.

survive in only four books.) Marcus received a copy of them from Rusticus (1.7.3) and often reflects on them.

Hadrian had the perception to call the young Marcus *verissimus* (“most truthful”) – honest and realistic.⁸ Marcus gave still another impression to some of his contemporaries. In a letter from about 145–147 to Marcus, who now has the title Caesar, Fronto confesses that he has commented on Marcus’ serious and morose character to some close friends. He notes that Marcus has the habit of reading a book in the theater or at a banquet. The adjectives he goes on to employ reveal the popular estimate of the dour and serious Stoic.⁹ Fronto could not have known this entry from the *Meditations* (6.46):

Just as all the business of the amphitheatre and such places offends you as always one and the same sight, and this monotony of the spectacle bores you, so it is too with your experience of life as a whole: everything, up or down, is the same, with the same causes. How much longer, then?

Nor is it likely that Fronto would detect the allusion to Heraclitus’ saying that the road up and the road down are one and the same.¹⁰

As Justin had done when Marcus was still the adoptive son of Antoninus Pius, the biography of Marcus Aurelius by “Julius Capitolinus” in the *Augustan History* entitles Marcus “The Philosopher.” Marcus, he says, “devoted his entire life to philosophy, and . . . in the purity of his life far surpassed other emperors.”¹¹ One is provoked to ask: What can the biographer mean by “philosophy” – that the young Marcus wore a rough cloak (*pallium*) and slept on the floor until he was dissuaded from this crude practice by his mother? That, as with Polemon, the head of Plato’s Academy in the early third century BC, neither grief nor joy could alter the set expression on his face, or that he was hard and dour, one might say “a Stoic”?¹² The biography also reports Marcus’ distaste for the amphitheater and his reputation for being dour (*durus*).¹³

⁸ *HA Marc.* 1.10. Hadrian is making a pun on Marcus’ family name Verus (“Truthful”). Both his father and grandfather bore the name Annius Verus.

⁹ The Latin terms are *durus* (“dour” is a derivative), *intempestivus* (“with no sense of time or place”), and *odiosus* (“disagreeable”).

¹⁰ See Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; rpt. 1981), Fragment 103: “The way up and down is one and the same.”

¹¹ *HA Marc.* 1.1.

¹² *HA Marc.* 2.5, 16.5, and 22.3.

¹³ *HA Marc.* 4.8.10 and 22.5.

If the claims are accurate – and they seem corroborated by Fronto – it is a tribute to Marcus that Antoninus Pius at the approach of his death passed imperial power to him with the watchword *aequanimitas*.¹⁴ The term – in Greek, *ataraxia* (literally, “undisturbedness”) – is a key expression in Stoicism and points to the Stoic sage’s mental imperturbability (hence “equanimity” in English). Marcus also wore a beard. What was generally called “the philosopher’s beard” was a symbol of Greek culture that began with Hadrian and continued with Antoninus Pius. Marcus’ beard, his Greek cloak, and his habit of sleeping on a hard pallet proclaimed him a Stoic. (He grew his beard even longer than Antoninus Pius had done.) The most beautiful image of him as a Roman *imperator* (army commander) is that of the equestrian bronze statue originally displayed on the Esquiline Hill in Rome and later brought to the Capitoline by Michelangelo.¹⁵ The head with its inward looking and downcast eyes and the long beard seems to announce a new age of spirituality.

Anyone interested in a fictive but plausible recollection of Hadrian as he came to know the Stoic prince who was to become his grandson by adoption should read the last pages of Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian*. These are fictional memoirs Hadrian addresses to Marcus during his last year as emperor. The following excerpts are revealing:

I concerned myself with the education of this almost too sober little boy, helping your father to choose the best masters for you. Verus, the Most Veracious: I used to play on your name; you are perhaps the only being who has never lied to me.

I have seen you read with passion the writings of philosophers, and clothe yourself in harsh wool, sleeping on the bare floor and forcing your somewhat frail body to all the mortifications of the Stoics . . . I divine in you the presence of a genius which is not necessarily that of the statesman; the world will doubtless be forever the better off, however, for having once seen such qualities operating in conjunction with supreme authority. I have arranged the essentials for your adoption by Antoninus; under the new name by which you will one day be designated in the list of emperors you are now and henceforth my grandson. I believe that I may be giving mankind the only chance it will ever have to realize Plato’s dream, to see a philosopher pure of heart ruling over his fellow men.¹⁶

¹⁴ *HA Marc.* 7.3.

¹⁵ The best account of the symbolic meaning of imperial beards is that of Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, tr. Alan Shapiro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 217–233.

¹⁶ Quoted from Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian and Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian*, tr. Grace Frick (1954; rpt. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005), 268–269.

In Yourcenar, Hadrian's judgment that Marcus would realize Plato's ideal of the philosopher king is inspired by Julius Capitolinus.¹⁷ Marcus himself would not agree. In the *Meditations* he admonishes himself:

Start straight away, if that is in your power; don't look over your shoulder to see if people will know. Don't hope for Plato's utopian republic, but be content with the smallest step forward, and regard even that result as no mean achievement. (9.29)

This wisdom of the emperor was first inspired by Severus, who helped him understand Thrax, Helvidius, Cato, Dio, and Brutus "to have conceived the idea of a balanced constitution, a commonwealth based on equality and freedom of speech, and of a monarchy which values above all the liberty of the subject" (1.14.1). These are the words of our only ancient candidate for the title of Philosopher King.

It should come as no surprise that in the biography of Avidius Cassius in the *Augustan History* we discover a fictive letter to Marcus in which his adoptive brother Lucius Verus reports that Cassius dismissed the emperor as a "hag of a philosopher" and employed the word *philosophus* as an insult.¹⁸ Cassius' biographer adds that at the beginning of the Marcomannic War in 168, when Marcus was about to set off for the Danube frontier, he was earnestly asked to make his "Precepts of Philosophy" public to all Rome and accordingly discussed his "Exhortations" on three consecutive days.¹⁹ The phrase "precepts of philosophy" (*praecepta philosophiae*) and the biographer's Latin transliteration of the Greek word *parainesis* ("exhortation") are significant since they reflect the ethical character of the philosophy we find in the *Meditations*. But can such words actually refer to the journal we have come to call the *Meditations*? Some have been eager to seize on this as one of the extremely rare references to the *Meditations* in Late Antiquity, but the *Meditations* were not meant for the public.²⁰ They were meant for an audience of one, their author, in the time he could spare from his public duties. Marcus entered into his journal reflections addressed *eis heauton* ("to himself"), as the title came to be known in Greek in the Renaissance. Yet perhaps this strange and implausible passage in Cassius' biography is evidence

¹⁷ Cf. *HA Marc.* 27.7 and 19.12.

¹⁸ *HA Av. Cass.* 1.8.

¹⁹ *HA Av. Cass.* 3.6.

²⁰ It is intriguing that one of the two entries on Markos in the *Suda*, the Byzantine encyclopedia, reports that Marcus is said to have written an account or introduction to his own life in twelve books (*Suda* M 315 Adler).

that there was a dim and flickering awareness of their existence in the late fourth century, when the *Augustan History* was put together.

Marcus was of course a highly public and visible personality to his subjects during his lifetime, and he was well memorialized in death. His image and those of members of the imperial family, including Commodus, passed through the hands of his subjects on coins. More than a decade after his death the Romans could study his recurring image on the spiral bands of the column commemorating his victories.²¹ His equestrian statue dominated the Esquiline. Mounted on his bronze horse, the bearded emperor looks down on Rome but seems removed from the city's hustle and bustle. His head is slightly lowered; he seems to be looking inward. Henry James greatly admired the statue: "I doubt if any statue of king or captain in the public places of the world has more to commend it to the general heart."²² Many other portraits of him are attested; some have survived. But his inner world remained unknown to his subjects.

3. The Private World of the *Meditations*

The first clear reference to the *Meditations* in later antiquity comes from an oration by Themistius, a close associate of Emperor Julian (AD 361–363), which was addressed to Valens, Emperor of the East (364–378).²³ Themistius, thinking of Valens' brother and co-emperor Valentinian, speaks of brotherly love and says that Valens has no need of the "exhortations" (*parangelmata*) of Marcus.²⁴ This is a fair description of the *Medi-*

²¹ The column of Marcus Aurelius is well presented in its context by Penelope J. E. Davies, *Death and the Emperor: Roman Imperial Monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163–171. Photographs of some of the scenes on the column appear in Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), Plates 24–38. Fronto attests the frequency of young Marcus' portraits; see Haines, *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto . . .*, vol. 1, 206–207. There is evidence for the portraits (*imagines*) treasured after his death in private houses at *HA Marc.* 16.4–6.

²² Henry James, *Italian Hours* (1959; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 142. *Italian Hours* was first published in 1909.

²³ Julian himself might refer to Marcus as emperor and to his *Meditations* in his satire *The Caesars*. His description of Marcus' bright and almost immaterial body (317 C–D) has been taken to reflect *Meditations* 10.1 and 11.12, but in both these entries Marcus is referring to his soul. When Marcus' turn comes to deliver an address to the gods (328 B–C) he refuses to speak; the gods know what his character is. R. B. Rutherford, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 10, argues against Julian's familiarity with the *Meditations*.

²⁴ Themistius, Oration 6 (81C).

tations: they are Marcus' exhortations to himself. There is nothing quite like them in Greek or Latin literature, although Epictetus recommended the address "to oneself" as a spiritual exercise.²⁵ Some of the entries of the *Meditations* are impenetrable to all but their author, such as this:

A black character, an effeminate, unbending character, the character of a brute or dumb animal: infantile, stupid, fraudulent, coarse, mercenary, despotic. (4.28)

We would never have known of the slaves Benedicta and Theodotus, once attached to Marcus' house (1.17.7), nor of the simple, unaffected style of a letter Rusticus wrote to Marcus' mother from Sinuessa (1.7.2). But the *Meditations* reveal some organization and contain passages of great beauty. Some display a mastery of rhetoric.

As we have seen, the entries of Book 1 are a testament to Marcus' gratitude to all those who had helped shape his life, beginning with his grandfather Verus and ending with the gods. The last entry of the *Meditations* (12.36) comes as a fitting conclusion:

Mortal man, you have lived as a citizen in this great city. What matter if that life is five or fifty years? The laws of the city apply equally to all. So what is there to fear in your dismissal from that city? This is no tyrant or corrupt judge who dismisses you, but the very same nature that brought you in . . . Completion is determined by that being who caused first your composition and now your dissolution. You have no part in either causation. Go then in peace: the god who lets you go is at peace with you.

The same reflection is recorded for Epictetus.²⁶ The city that Marcus mentions is not Rome. It is the universal city of mankind.

Private as the *Meditations* are, Marcus recognizes his role as emperor when he reflects on his duty to serve as "a male, mature in years, a statesman, a Roman, a ruler" (3.5). But once he reflects impatience with his lot in life, when he is quoting a proverbial maxim: "A king's lot: to do good and be damned" (7.36.1). He also enjoins himself: "Take care not to be Caesarified, or dyed in purple" (6.30; "Caesarified" is a verb he seems to have invented in Greek). He also reflects on the brutality of the fighting on the Danube. Two entries are most revealing of his experience of warfare. Later he writes:

²⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.103 and 111.

²⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.33.

A spider is proud to trap a fly. Men are proud of their own hunting – a hare, a sprat in the net, boars, bears, Sarmatian prisoners. If you examine their motives, are they not all bandits? (10.10)

A more trenchant analogy had been set down earlier:

If you have ever seen a severed hand or foot, or a head cut off and lying some way from the rest of the body – analogous is what someone does to himself, as far as he can, when he will not accept his lot and severs himself from society or does some unsocial act. (8.34)

Two panels showing the decapitation of enemy prisoners on his column in Rome (panels LXI and LXVI) are the grimmest scenes on the entire monument. But Marcus is not primarily reflecting on the brutality of war. Rather, he has found an image to illustrate the unity of nature and human society. The Stoics were committed to a belief in “the Whole” (*to holon*), not to “the All” (*to pan*).

4. The “Inner Citadel”: Marcus’ Empire over Himself

Marcus was actively involved in all affairs of state during his nineteen years as emperor. Reading and replying to the petitions that arrived from all parts of the empire, acting as a judge in cases at law, attending the meetings of the senate in Rome were activities that occupied almost all of his time. (One of the panels of his column in Rome shows him receiving a petition.) But Marcus could escape to his own “inner citadel.”²⁷ The most important of the therapies advanced in the *Meditations* is to withdraw into one’s own self or, in our sense of the word, to “meditate.” Marcus’ first full expression of this retreat comes in an entry in Book 4. It deserves quotation in full:

Men seek retreats for themselves – in the country, by the sea, in the hills – and you yourself are particularly prone to this yearning. But all this is quite unphilosophic, when it is open to you, at any time you want, to retreat into yourself. No retreat offers someone more quiet and relaxation

²⁷ The metaphor of the citadel of philosophy can be found in Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.7–13. Marcus repeats this injunction: “Remember that your directing mind becomes invincible when it withdraws into its own self-sufficiency” (8.48). On this see especially Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998; rpt. 2001), 101–127 and 327–328 (notes).

than that into his own mind, especially if he can dip into thoughts there which put him at immediate and complete ease: and by ease I simply mean a well-ordered life. So constantly give yourself this retreat, and renew yourself. The doctrines you will visit there should be few and fundamental, sufficient at one meeting to wash away all your pain and send you back free of resentment at what you must rejoin. (4.3)

This entry might seem solipsistic; it is not. The mind, our human rationality, is divine and unites all mankind. Marcus repeatedly states his fundamental beliefs: The best means to happiness is our inner disposition, our ability not to let the actions or opinions of others affect our resolve and tranquility (*aequanimitas*). We should distrust the appearances that can disturb us. We should be committed to the belief that Providence, not the “atoms” postulated as original matter by the philosopher Democritus, rules our lives and the universe. And it is only the instant that matters. Neither the past, to which Marcus devotes much thought, nor the future, which does not occupy him except as he reflects on the past and projects it into the future, should concern us. Obviously, none of these reflections or similar ones can be convincingly developed in a historical film.

I will illustrate only two of Marcus’ techniques to enter the tranquility of his inner citadel as he exercises an empire over himself.²⁸ The first therapy is to analyze what most people value as essential and thus to gain a sense of distance from values that are not essential to our happiness:

How good it is, when you have roast meat or suchlike foods before you, to impress on your mind that this is the dead body of a fish, this the dead body of a bird or pig; and again, that the Falernian wine is the mere juice of grapes, and your purple edged robe simply the hair of a sheep soaked in shell-fish blood! And in sexual intercourse that it is no more than the friction of a membrane and a spurt of mucus ejected. (6.13)

There are many entries reflecting Marcus’ appreciation of the rhythm, processes, and purpose of Nature and the Whole. One of the most vivid is this:

We should also attend to things like these, observing that even the incidental effects of the processes of Nature have their own charm and

²⁸ I quote these two texts in my “Introduction” to Hammond, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*, xxxiv and xviii–xix. Repetition of the fundamental is essential to Marcus’ spiritual exercises.

attraction. Take the baking of bread. The loaf splits open here and there, and those very cracks, in one way a failure of the baker's profession, somehow catch the eye and give particular stimulus to our appetite. Figs likewise burst open at full maturity: and in olives ripened on the tree the very proximity of decay lends a special beauty to the fruit . . . So any man with a feeling and deeper insight for the workings of the Whole will find some pleasure in almost every aspect of their disposition . . . he will see a kind of bloom and fresh beauty in an old woman or an old man. (3.2)

These words of Marcus, as do most of his *Meditations*, speak for themselves. They first spoke to himself, now to ourselves. The powerful fascination with the life and *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius has never abated. But it has many facets. For example, in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1882) Walter Pater reminds us of the spread of Christianity under the Antonines, especially during Marcus' reign. Marcus mentions the Christians only once, as he meditates on death; he obviously had an aversion to their theatricality (11.3). Persecutions of Christians occurred during his reign. But to most of the Christian writers of modern times Marcus has seemed a soul born to be Christian, an *anima naturaliter Christiana*. So he appeared to Ernest Renan in the last volume of his vast history of Christianity and to Matthew Arnold in a 1863 essay.²⁹ In the glimpse of him that Arnold gives us at the conclusion of his essay we see the emperor at the end of his life: "stretching out his arms for something beyond, – *tendentemque manus ripae ulterioris amore*."³⁰ Arnold alludes to and partially quotes from Virgil.³¹ But the further shore that Virgil refers to is not the one reached by crossing the infernal river Acheron but the shore of the light of Arnold's Christianity, reached by crossing the infernal swamp of paganism. Panel LXXVIII of Marcus' column in Rome shows

²⁹ Ernest Renan, *The History of the Origins of Christianity*, vol. 7: *Marcus-Aurelius* (London: Mathieson, 1890). Matthew Arnold, "Marcus Aurelius," in R. H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 133–157; quotations at 140 and 136. Arnold's essay first appeared in *The Victoria Magazine*, 2 (November, 1863), 1–19. I provide a brief sketch in my "Introduction" to Hammond, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*, xi–xliv, at xxxviii–xli. A detailed account of the survival and fame of the *Meditations* can be found in A. S. L. Farquharson (ed. and tr.), *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Antoninus*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944; rpt. 1968), vol. 1, xiii–xxviii. Farquharson's work is the only full-scale modern edition and commentary of the *Meditations*.

³⁰ Arnold, "Marcus Aurelius," 157.

³¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.314: *tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore* ("they were stretching out their hands, out of love for the further shore").

the emperor and his troops crossing the Danube on a pontoon bridge. In a figurative sense, however, the further shore Marcus yearned for lay beyond this formidable river. It was not military conquest to establish Roman dominion that drove him on but the conquest of establishing an inner empire over himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Was Commodus Really That Bad?

Eleonora Cavallini

Anthony Mann's film *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is based on the historically plausible assumption that the primary causes of the epoch-making phenomenon referred to in its title can be traced back less to the barbarian invasions than to the weakening of Roman institutions and the ascent to the imperial throne by a series of mentally unstable and megalomaniac princes, who were incapable of, or uninterested in, their governing responsibilities. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) is a loose remake of Mann's film, but with a reversal of perspective. Victory over the Marcomanni and Quadi is here depicted as a defining and definitive affirmation of Roman power, and there is no mention of military or political tensions on the eastern front or of the threat posed by the Parthians. So young Commodus, after becoming Caesar thanks to a historically improbable parricide, does not have to concern himself with strategic or military problems but can devote himself to courting the favor of the Roman mob with sumptuous and bloody gladiatorial games.

In its presentation of the enmity between Maximus, the valiant and experienced general who remains loyal to the ideals of the legitimate but dead emperor Marcus Aurelius, and Commodus, the treacherous, merciless, and calculating usurper, *Gladiator* puts much greater emphasis on the dramatic implications of its story than on historical authenticity or probability. Maximus' and Commodus' personalities are antithetical, yet

they would be inseparable friends if it had not been for their implacable enmity that results from Marcus' affection for Maximus in preference to his own son. From this point of view the villainous Commodus is the filmmakers' revival of an illustrious if not ancient model, that of the Shakespearian tyrant Macbeth. Maximus functions as a sort of Banquo's Ghost, an avenger relentlessly haunting a Commodus who is guilty of murdering the good old ruler. If we view Maximus as a figure who reflects Commodus' bad conscience, then it is clear from almost the beginning that Maximus cannot survive at the film's end. Still, we expect him to succeed, as he does, in overthrowing the tyrant. Both have been obsessed with the idea of coming face to face with their former rival.

By contrast, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* focuses on the mechanisms that underlie historical events, although it introduces a number of merely hypothetical and factually groundless details and a series of fictitious characters. Among the former is the unexpected revelation of Commodus' "true" paternity; most prominent among the latter are the hero Livius, the model for Maximus, and the noble Greek philosopher Timonides, Marcus Aurelius' counselor and a supporter of such Stoic principles as egalitarianism and an open attitude toward foreign peoples. Like *Gladiator* and most historical epics, Mann's film is structured like a historical novel, in which imaginary characters interact with real ones.

This familiar narrative strategy has its roots in Romantic literature, especially, in English, the influential novels of Sir Walter Scott, and is still a favorite with a vast part of the reading public worldwide. Because the first part of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is rather rigorous and austere, if with a production design amazingly beautiful in its realism, the second part tends to indulge too much in melodrama and *coups de théâtre*. However, the film does not fail to make accurate references to the tensions between Rome and its eastern allies, to the threat of the Parthians, and to Lucilla's plots against her brother Commodus. Nor does it neglect Commodus' personal penchant for stepping into the arena (incidentally, with perilous results) or his megalomania, repeatedly mentioned in the ancient sources. In particular, the film evokes his pretentious claim to be compared to Hercules and his desire to change the name of Rome to Colonia Commodiana. Although he does not push as far as the ferocious, lucid perversity of Scott's Commodus, Mann's Commodus still remains very close to the Commodus of tradition – a mythomaniac and psychopath who used to suffocate every kind of revolt in blood and, above all, was utterly unable to hold the reins of the empire.

The main difference between the two films lies in Commodus' relationship with Livius/Maximus. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Commodus actually shows some sort of respect, even affection, for his friend and rival, whom he charges with important missions and faces in a fair duel at the end. There is even a scene when Commodus, confronted with Livius' decision to punish the gladiators accused of cowardice by death, opposes his rival. There follows a spectacular chariot-race duel between the two that cannot but remind contemporary viewers of the grandiose race in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), in which Stephen Boyd, Mann's Livius, had played the bad guy.

1. Commodus in Ancient Historiography

But who was Commodus according to the historical tradition? Judging by the best-known ancient sources, which reflect the acrimonious point of view of Rome's senatorial aristocracy, it seems hard to imagine anyone worse. Even before Commodus' birth his mother Faustina had been tormented by sinister warning dreams, while his early childhood was scarred by the untimely loss of his twin brother:

Faustina, when pregnant with Commodus and his brother, dreamed that she gave birth to serpents, one of which, however, was fiercer than the other. But after she had given birth to Commodus and Antoninus, the latter, for whom the astrologers had cast a horoscope as favourable as that of Commodus, lived to be only four years old.¹

Although his father had entrusted the young prince to the care of excellent pedagogues, he revealed his true nature during adolescence, becoming depraved, shameless, and prone to debauchery. His depravity was such that, once he became emperor, he did not hesitate to sign hasty and disadvantageous peace treaties with the peoples defeated by his father in order to be able to devote himself to his dark pleasures: "He abandoned the war which his father had almost finished and submitted to the enemy's terms, and then he returned to Rome."² Some courtiers, supported by Commodus' own sister Lucilla, hatched a conspiracy. Its failure caused bloody retaliation, especially among the aristocracy. Lucilla was exiled.³ Afterwards Commodus appointed Tigridius Perennis prefect of the

¹ *Augustan History: Commodus* 1.3–4; quoted from David Magie (tr.), *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, vol. 1 (1921; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 265. Future references will be abbreviated as *HA Comm.*

² *HA Comm.* 3.5 (Magie, 271).

³ *HA Comm.* 4.

guard and left him in sole charge of running the empire while he carried on with his irresponsible, lustful life:

Perennis, being well acquainted with Commodus' character, discovered the way to make himself powerful, namely, by persuading Commodus to devote himself to pleasure while he, Perennis, assumed all the burdens of the government – an arrangement which Commodus joyfully accepted. Under this agreement, then, Commodus lived, rioting in the Palace amid banquets and in baths along with 300 concubines, gathered together for their beauty and chosen from both matrons and harlots, and with minions, also 300 in number, whom he had collected by force and by purchase indiscriminately from the common people and the nobles solely on the basis of bodily beauty.⁴

Commodus' inordinate interest in gladiatorial games led him to engage in such combat personally, often putting at serious risk the lives of his courtiers. Finally he had his sister killed:

He fought in the arena with foils, but sometimes, with his chamberlains acting as gladiators, with sharpened swords. By this time Perennis had secured all the power for himself. He slew whomsoever he wished to slay, plundered a great number, violated every law, and put all the booty into his own pocket. Commodus, for his part, killed his sister Lucilla, after banishing her to Capri.⁵

After twelve years of misdeeds Commodus could not hope to avoid a violent death. His assassination was brought about by a conspiracy among his closest collaborators, who had been aided by his own concubine.⁶

In the malevolent and resentful description given by the *Augustan History*, Commodus combines all the clichés that for centuries had been attributed to the portrayals of tyrants and are already recognizable in the historiography of tyrannical regimes in archaic Greece.⁷ Such commonplaces include the dream warning the mother during her pregnancy, family bereavements that scar the despot's childhood, abnormal or even bizarre sexuality coupled with a predictably violent nature, a marked

⁴ *HA Comm.* 5.2–4 (Magie, 275–277).

⁵ *HA Comm.* 5.5–7 (Magie, 277).

⁶ *HA Comm.* 17.1–2.

⁷ Cf. Herodotus' portraits of Periander of Corinth (*Histories* 3.48–53 and 5.92), Polycrates of Samos (3.39–45 and 121–125), Peisistratus of Athens (1.60–64), and Peisistratus' sons Hippias and Hipparchus (5.55–62, 6.102–103 and 107). See also below.

tendency to persecute and humiliate the aristocratic class, and, of course, a horrible as well as paradigmatic end.⁸ In the biographers' or historians' intentions the tyrant's death should act as a warning, a deterrent against any future autocratic ambitions on the part of power-hungry young men. A particularly picturesque detail about Commodus is the battalion of his concubines and catamites. Females and males numbered three hundred – just like the fallen heroes of Thermopylae! Commodus partly acquired them by money, partly by force; the latter is the case of those he chose from among the aristocracy. This is reminiscent both of the so-called “Flowers of Samos,” most likely a collection of female and male beauties recruited by the tyrant Polycrates for his own pleasure, and of a place on the island called Laure, a sort of red-light district where the tyrant had placed a great number of courtesans in luxuriant gardens and surrounded them with various amenities. The Peripatetic philosopher Clearchus, who describes this place, identifies a specific cause-and-effect relation between Polycrates' lust and his violent death which is consistent with his, Clearchus', moralistic intent. Herodotus, however, attributes Polycrates' death to a personal grudge that the Persian noble Oroetes held against him.⁹ Clearchus reports:

Polycrates, the tyrant of luxurious Samos, came to ruin on account of his dissipated mode of life, emulating as he did the effeminate practices of the Lydians. From this motive he constructed in the city the famous ‘Quarter’ of Samos to rival the park at Sardis called Sweet Embrace, and in competition with the flowers of Lydia he wove the widely heralded ‘Flowers’ of the Samians. Of those two innovations, the Samian Quarter was a lane crowded with professional women, and he literally filled Hellas with all kinds of foods that tempted to sensuality and incontinence; the flowers of the Samians, on the other hand, are the various charms of women and men. But while the whole city was still engaged in holiday revels and drunken orgies (the Persians attacked and conquered it).¹⁰

In Athens, Hipparchus, son of the tyrant Peisistratus, had lusted after the young aristocrat Harmodius and did not hesitate to inflict violence

⁸ On such commonplaces and their mechanisms in the Greek world see Carmine Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe: Per un'archeologia del potere nella Grecia antica* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996).

⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.120–121.

¹⁰ Clearchus, Fragment 44 (Wehrli), preserved by Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 12.57 (540f–541a), quoted from Charles Burton Gulick (tr.), *Athenaeus: The Deipnosophists*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1933; several rpts.), 445–447. Clearchus' text contains a gap, which calls for an emendation such as this.

and humiliation upon his family. This mad passion caused the vengeance of Harmodius and his friend and lover Aristogeiton, who killed Hipparchus. The historical truth of the two tyrannicides' famous story is confirmed by Thucydides, even if, as usual, the biographical tradition later enriched the episode with pseudo-historical details.¹¹ By analogy, there is no reason to doubt the actual existence of Polycrates' "Eros Center," as we might call it with a modern term. The details about Commodus' unnatural "profane battalion," however, especially the exact number of its members as if they really were a military formation, are more in the nature of a grotesque anecdote that is likely to cause not so much indignation as hilarity among readers. The late, and historically suspect, biographical reconstruction offered by the *Augustan History* seems to have been drawn from the abundant anecdotes about stereotypical tyrants without much regard for historiographical exactness. Athenaeus, whose *Deipnosophists* date shortly after Commodus' death, may himself have contributed to the popularity of such anecdotes.¹²

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Commodus' violent lust is (and had to be) more veiled. It surfaces only in the scene in which Commodus insults and threatens a pretty Germanic captive but finally gives up and gives her to Livius, who naturally takes no advantage of this donation. *Gladiator*, by contrast, introduces a more disquieting and, in view of the ancient stereotypes surveyed above, more "tyrannical" element into Commodus' character: his incestuous passion for Lucilla. Mother-son incest is a distinctive trait of the tyrant's behavior since, according to a widespread archetype, possessing the mother amounts to obtaining mastery of one's land. This is shown by the myth of Oedipus, by the legendary tradition about Periander of Corinth and Hippias of Athens, right down to hostile rumors about the relationship between Nero and his mother Agrippina.¹³ *Gladiator* points to the most characteristic element in Commodus' despotic nature, one that shows him in the most sinister

¹¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 6.53–59. On the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton and its Hellenistic-Roman elaborations, in particular the late introduction of a new character, the heroic courtesan Leana, see Corrado Petrocchi, *La stola e il silenzio: Sulla condizione femminile nel mondo romano* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1989), 27–31, and my *Le squaldrine impenitenti: Femminilità "irregolare" in Grecia e a Roma* (Milan: Bompiani, 1999), 93–95.

¹² I discuss the chronology of the *Deipnosophists* in *Ateneo di Naucrati: Il Banchetto dei Sapienti, Libro XIII: Sulle donne* (Bologna: Nautilus, 2001), 5–11, with bibliographical references.

¹³ On Oedipus see Marie Delcourt, *Œdipe, ou La légende du conquérant* (1944; rpt. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1981), 190–205. Cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 14.2, on Nero and Agrippina. On the whole matter see further Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe*, 147–170.

light and creates a dramatic effect, albeit one historically unjustified. The film even presents Lucilla as a credible substitute for the mother figure who traditionally leads or aids the tyrant to his illegal sovereignty.¹⁴ Commodus' morbid affection for Lucilla foreshadows his will to power with disquieting implications that go well beyond the gossip and malevolence of the *Augustan History*.

Compared to the caricature of Commodus in the *Augustan History*, Cassius Dio's account is somewhat more forgiving, although it is still packed with picturesque, sensationalistic, and sometimes gruesome details.¹⁵ Dio attributes Commodus' negative qualities mostly to the influence of bad company:

This man [Commodus] was not naturally wicked, but, on the contrary, as guileless as any man that ever lived. His great simplicity, however, together with his cowardice, made him the slave of his companions, and it was through them that he at first, out of ignorance, missed the better life and then was led on into lustful and cruel habits, which soon became second nature.¹⁶

Instead of insisting on his perversions and sexual eccentricities, the historiographer prefers to focus more on Commodus' bloody nature and gladiatorial exploits:

Commodus devoted most of his life to ease and to horses and to combats of wild beasts and of men. In fact, besides all that he did in private, he often slew in public large numbers of men and beasts as well. For example, all alone with his own hands, he dispatched five hippopotami together with two elephants on two successive days; and he also killed rhinoceroses and a camelopard. This is what I have to say with reference to his career as a whole.¹⁷

Dio describes Commodus' unusually strong passion for gladiatorial combats as a mere oddity of his personality, although we may suspect that the emperor's appearances in the arena concealed a specific design, obtaining the consensus of the urban plebs. In *The Fall of the Roman*

¹⁴ Cf. Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe*, 147–149. Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), examines the role of female figures, especially goddesses, in the acquisition of power in several contexts.

¹⁵ So is the one in Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Time of Marcus Aurelius* 1.6.1 and 2.10.3.

¹⁶ Dio 72.1.1.

¹⁷ Dio 72.10.2–3.

Empire this passion is recast as a hereditary disposition because of Commodus' "true" father, a famous gladiator. The scene, historically most questionable, in which Verulus acknowledges Commodus as his natural son reinforces the stereotype of the tyrant by attributing to him a humble, even spurious birth. Half-legendary ancient models for this include Cypselus of Corinth, son of one obscure Aeetion and of the despised Princess Labda, Pittacus of Lesbos, and Orthagoras of Sicyon, whose father was a butcher and cook.¹⁸ Dio does not push his hostility to Commodus that far. But, as a historiographer of senatorial descent, he still holds a bitter grudge against an emperor who in his view was too devoted to the plebs and too cowardly to finish the war against the Marcomanni and Quadi, whom Marcus Aurelius had already seriously defeated. Dio admits that Commodus was successful in a series of campaigns against some peoples living beyond the borders of Dacia and, above all, against the Britons.¹⁹ Nevertheless he gives most of the credit for these victories to valiant generals such as Ulpius Marcellus, one of the few people who, according to Dio, were spared Commodus' cruel envy.

2. Commodus in Historical Fact

But was Commodus really *that* bad? Barry Baldwin, one of the recent scholars who have studied this controversial emperor, starts from the analysis of a debated passage from the late fifth-century AD Carthaginian poet Blossius Aemilius Dracontius.²⁰ In a work entitled *Satisfactio*, composed to appease the anger of the Vandal king Guntamund, Dracontius first praises Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Titus; then, unexpectedly, he starts singing Commodus' praises. Lines 187–190 are most surprising:

¹⁸ Despite the poet Alcaeus' malevolent insinuations it is perfectly credible that Pittacus was born a fully-fledged aristocrat; see Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe*, 128–131. Besides, Pittacus was not a tyrant, as Alcaeus biliously describes him (Fragment 348 Voigt), but a sort of extraordinary magistrate, who enjoyed full powers but had been regularly elected by the people. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 3.9.5–6 (1285a30–b3). On Orthagoras of Sicyon and other examples of not only Greek tyrants whose birth was obscure or spurious see Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe*, 44–46 and 115–133.

¹⁹ Dio 72.8.

²⁰ Barry Baldwin, "Commodus the Good Poet and Good Emperor: Explaining the Inexplicable," *Gymnasium*, 97 (1990), 224–231. An earlier case of bad emperor–good poet seems to have been Nero; cf. Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003; rpt. 2005), 82–83 and 293 note 107 (ancient source references).

*Alter ait princeps modico sermone poeta
Commodus Augustus, vir pietate bonus:
"Nobile praeceptum, rectores, discite post me:
sit bonus in vita qui volet esse deus."*

The other emperor, Commodus Augustus, a poet and a good man with a sense of duty and devotion, says in a modest little discourse: "A noble precept, rulers [or: teachers], learn from me: he who wants to be a god should lead a responsible life."

Whereas other scholars postulate a gross mistake on the part of Dracontius and assume him to be confusing Commodus with his father, the philosopher-emperor, Baldwin plausibly notes that such a blatant mistake could hardly be attributed to a poet who is usually accurate in his use of historical sources. Therefore Baldwin believes that the moralizing couplet does refer to Commodus. He rightly observes that any Roman citizen of high social status was well educated and could easily compose a few impromptu lines. All the more so then a young prince whom his father had entrusted to the care of highly esteemed and solicitous tutors, who might even have been the same *rectores* mentioned in the fragment.²¹ Baldwin persuasively argues that even a truly evil and perverted ruler could, then as now, appeal to noble, virtuous principles at opportune moments: "no one nowadays would be so naive as to deny the authorship of a honourable versified sentiment to a dishonorable ruler – Nero is the obvious Roman paradigm."²²

What is more difficult to justify is Dracontius' appreciation for Commodus' moral qualities. Even if we follow Baldwin's claim that the two lines Dracontius quotes date back to Commodus' adolescence, the expression *vir bonus* presupposes an adult Commodus. About this, Baldwin observes that the *Augustan History* is exceptionally emphatic in painting Commodus in dark colors and that even Dio and Herodian "allow him some good qualities and deeds."²³ On the other hand, it is difficult to find ancient sources that are really favorable to Commodus. This is true for Baldwin and F. M. Clover before him.²⁴ Clover's conclusion, shared by Baldwin, is that Dracontius' positive judgment is the result of the good

²¹ *HA Comm.* 1.5–6.

²² Baldwin, "Commodus the Good Poet and Good Emperor," 228.

²³ Baldwin, "Commodus the Good Poet and Good Emperor," 229–230; he refers to, e.g., Dio 72.7.4. Dio credits Commodus with some success in the military field and some acts of generosity but on the whole remains an extremely unfavorable source.

²⁴ Frank Clover, "Commodus the Poet," *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 32 (1988), 19–33. Clover, too, dealt with Dracontius' problematic lines.

treatment Commodus gave to the province of Africa and that “the view from Antioch and Carthage differed from the view in Rome.”²⁵ However, it appears that the judgment on Roman emperors in late ancient and Byzantine sources tend to diverge significantly from those of historians from previous centuries.²⁶ This is probably due to the influence of Christianity, as I will indicate below.

More recently Arthur Eckstein avoids the ancient writers’ rumors about Commodus’ vices and bizarre behavior and focuses on the problem, frequently raised, concerning the limits of the Roman Empire’s expansion and its border stability.²⁷ He notes that the widespread image of Rome as perpetually engaged in military campaigns is reductive and that a foreign policy like Commodus’, primarily aimed at retaining and consolidating the positions already gained, is fully consistent with Roman custom. In particular, referring to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Eckstein observes:

the deliberate planning of large-scale conquest such as that undertaken by Claudius and Trajan was unusual, for it went against the entire Roman administrative history. In that sense, too, Commodus’ decision to abandon the deliberate advance across the upper and middle Danube and instead to rely for frontier security on ad-hoc military responses to German attacks, should they occur, was a return to tradition, despite the depiction of his decision in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator* as irresponsible or even treasonous.²⁸

Eckstein further points out that the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace traditionally dating from 31 BC, the Battle of Actium, to AD 250, was an ideal already pursued during the Roman Republic. Mediterranean territories like Spain, North Africa, and the Hellenistic kingdoms appeared to be pacified, largely thanks to the disappearance of some of Rome’s most dangerous enemies, especially Carthage. This led Rome to stop expanding its borders by new wars of conquest in those areas. Eckstein convincingly claims that Commodus’ choice to give up campaigns of conquest pursued by his father cannot reasonably be regarded as an act of cowardice nor as a display of political ineptitude. As Eckstein states: “More important from a historical point of view is the question if

²⁵ Clover, “Commodus the Poet,” 30.

²⁶ On Commodus, for instance, see Jordanes, *Romana* 372, and John Malalas, *Chronicle* 12 (pages 283–290 Bonn).

²⁷ Arthur M. Eckstein, “Commodus and the Limits of the Roman Empire,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 53–72.

²⁸ Eckstein, “Commodus and the Limits of the Roman Empire,” 63.

Commodus' decision was strategically wrong."²⁹ The answer, Eckstein says, is still open. As for the senatorial class's hostile rumors about Commodus' slothful and debauched lifestyle, Eckstein does not hesitate to plead the emperor's cause. Commodus, according to many sources, carried out his administrative tasks with at least some accuracy.³⁰

Aside from the strategic effectiveness of his foreign policy, Commodus' attempt at restoring peace in the empire must have been welcome to a large sector of the Roman population, above all the plebs who were exhausted by the recent wars. Significant evidence in this respect are the writings of Christian authors which Baldwin and Eckstein do not analyze.³¹ Among the most interesting sources is a passage from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, which quotes from an anonymous anti-Montanist treatise.³² The date for the rise of Montanism is uncertain, as the sources about this religious movement vary considerably in their chronology. However, it is not improbable that Montanism arose in the year 172, as Eusebius claims.³³ Some time ago, historian Santo Mazzarino adduced this anti-Montanist passage as a source that went against the grain when modern historiography still tended to portray Commodus if not as a pervert, then at least as a faint-hearted coward.³⁴ The Christian author shows appreciation for the peace that Commodus guaranteed the Roman people by adopting a conciliatory attitude toward the foreign nations against whom previous emperors, especially Marcus Aurelius, had fought and toward the Christians, whose persecutions Commodus stopped. As a refutation of the prophecies of Montanist Maximilla, who had foretold a long age of wars and anarchy, the anonymous author firmly states:

Surely it is now obvious that this . . . is a lie? Today it is more than thirteen years since the woman's death, and there has been neither general nor

²⁹ Eckstein, "Commodus and the Limits of the Roman Empire," 63.

³⁰ Sources and bibliography in Eckstein, "Commodus and the Limits of the Roman Empire," 67 note 41.

³¹ Baldwin, "Commodus the Good Poet and Good Emperor," 230 note 27, nonetheless hints at the pro-Christian attitude of Commodus and especially of his concubine Marcia.

³² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 37, identifies the author with Rhodo, a Christian writer during the age of Commodus.

³³ Among the ancient sources concerning Montanism the writings of Tertullian, probably the most famous and influential member of this sect, are of particular importance. See also Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48 and 49, and Jerome, *Epistle* 41 (to Marcella).

³⁴ Santo Mazzarino, *L'impero romano* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), vol. 2, 433.

local war in the world, but rather – even for Christians – continuous peace, by the mercy of God.³⁵

The long period of peace here referred to can only be identified with Commodus' rule. Indeed, the thirteen years must fall either into the age that preceded the wars begun under Septimius Severus or into the subsequent age. According to the second hypothesis, the dating would go back to 232, but this chronology is too late for the composition of this treatise, which repeatedly refers to Montanism as a recent movement. Therefore the only alternative left is to date the composition of this work shortly after 192, the year of Commodus' death. Besides, the years between 179 and 192 were a period of peace for Christians not only because there were no major wars but also because Commodus left them largely undisturbed. His leniency toward Christians is well known, not least to those ancient historians who belong to traditional Roman culture and are therefore not particularly well disposed toward the new religion. Cassius Dio writes:

There was a certain Marcia, the mistress of Quadratus (one of the men slain at this time), and Eclectus, his cubicularius [domestic steward]; the latter became the cubicularius of Commodus also, and the former, first the emperor's mistress and later the wife of Eclectus, and she saw them also perish by violence. The tradition is that she greatly favoured the Christians and rendered them many kindnesses, inasmuch as she could do anything with Commodus.³⁶

Dio introduces Marcia, Commodus' favorite and a strong supporter of Christianity, against a background of intrigues and crimes, and interprets the emperor's benevolence toward the Christians not as a display of tolerance or an open attitude toward minorities but rather as the consequence of Marcia's influence on him. Commodus is once again presented as weak, psychically unstable, and a slave to his pleasures. It is nonetheless difficult to believe that Commodus was willing to put himself at personal risk for the Christians only to please his concubine. It is more likely that Commodus was trying hard to support the needs of the Roman people, especially of the plebs as opposed to the senatorial

³⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.19; quoted from G. A. Williamson (tr.) and Andrew Louth (rev. and ed.), *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (London: Penguin, 1989), 163.

³⁶ Dio 72.4.6–7.

aristocracy. Mazzarino understood all this very well when he observed: “He [Commodus] thought he was ‘The Roman Hercules’ and loved to be called *Pius Felix*, two nicknames that later came to be regarded as ‘appellations of peace,’ in contrast to the *cognomina ex virtute*.” After quoting the anti-Montanist treatise mentioned above, Mazzarino further notes:

Commodus was, above all, the emperor of the Roman populace. In the Praetorian Guard there were conflicts between the cavalry and the infantry, and the populace supported the infantry. Commodus followed the people’s will. His economic policy also tried to help the poor: he established a ceiling price, imposing a *forma censoria* on the prices: for example, we know that in Commodus’ *forma censoria* the price of a slave was fixed at the amount of 500 denarii. Anyway, poverty and financial discomfort remained a serious problem both in Rome and in the whole empire: in Africa there were conflicts between shepherds and country people, while Gallia and Hispania were sacked by ferocious highwaymen. The banks went bankrupt.³⁷

Mazzarino analyzes other Christian sources – in particular, Hyppolitus’ *Philosophoumena* – from which it emerges that Commodus, although taking his cue from Marcia, made repeated efforts to save some exponents of the emerging Christian movement from slavery or other serious penal sanctions, among them, for example, Bishop Callistus. Callistus had been a slave of Carpophorus, a freedman of the house of Commodus, and had been charged by his master with the administration of a bank. Callistus went bankrupt and tried to run away. After many vicissitudes, the prefect of the city of Rome sentenced him to forced labor in Sardinia on account of his religion. At this point Marcia, “Commodus’ God-fearing concubine,” asked Victor, the bishop of Rome, to send her the names of the Christians who were serving their sentences in Sardinia in order to ask Commodus for their liberation. Despite a series of hitches Callistus, still in Rome, managed to be included in Marcia’s “liberation letter,” for he convinced her chamberlain to declare that he, Callistus, was a protégé of Marcia’s.³⁸

At this time Christian religious practices were forbidden by law, and persecution was therefore the rule while tolerance and leniency were the exceptions. Christians were officially granted their religious freedom only with the Edict of Milan in 311. So Commodus’ attitude can be regarded

³⁷ Both quotations, in my translation, are from Mazzarino, *L’impero romano*, vol. 2, 433–434.

³⁸ See Mazzarino, *L’impero romano*, vol. 2, 452–453. Mazzarino here also confirms the attribution of the *Philosophoumena* to Hyppolitus.

if not as openly innovative, then at least as far-sighted and consistent with Rome's overall aspiration to peace in the empire. Particularly malevolent ancient historians apparently deemed this to be a character flaw in Commodus. If we look at it from the perspective outlined above, however, it may well have been the very opposite.

Mazzarino's research on the relationship between Commodus and the empire's emerging Christian communities came later than *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, which adheres to the traditional hostile view of Commodus. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Hollywood epics had emphasized the cruel, persecutory attitude toward Christianity on the part of Roman emperors and aristocrats, most extensively on view in two historically questionable but emotionally powerful films, both adapted from extraordinarily popular novels: Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951) and William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). Therefore any attribution of pro-Christian feelings to Commodus, one of the most roundly criticized of all Roman emperors, would have been unthinkable. Commodus, whom ancient sources describe as similar to the ferocious, merciless Nero, was, in fact, quite unlike him, not least as an advocate of the minority religion that would later conquer the whole Roman Empire and even become its official religion with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. As we have seen, Commodus' political strategy, aside from the influence of his favorite Marcia, was in general oriented toward an acceptable (at least to him) compromise with what today we might call diversity, be it a religious minority like the Christians or the phenomenon, increasing at that time, of barbarian peoples penetrating into the empire. It is not by chance that the so-called "barbarians" were often Christian converts.

The absence of such considerations and reflections from *The Fall of the Roman Empire* unfortunately works against the film's second half, which looks much less accurate than the first, set on the frontier and culminating in the magnificent scene of Marcus Aurelius' funeral service. The massacre of the Germanic farmers, whom we see, more or less plausibly, as people now integrated into the fabric of Roman society and willing to live peacefully under Rome's protection, sharply contrasts with the ideal of pacification attributed to Commodus by all ancient sources, even the most hostile ones. The historical Marcus Aurelius, the Hellenizing and Stoic emperor, did not refrain from war and religious repression in order to save his Rome both from external threats and from the internal threat of a short-sighted conservative senate. A careful analysis of the historical Commodus reveals him, not his father and predecessor, to have been the last preserver of the empire, even if he did not live up to the complex challenges he was facing or may have found himself crushed under the

weight of an impossible task. After Commodus the fall of the Roman Empire became inevitable. It was slow but unstoppable, as the film tells and shows us. However, to attribute the responsibility for such a chain of events to the weaknesses of individual emperors is to address only one part of the historical truth.

Still, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* ought to be appreciated for its attempt to undertake an analysis of Roman society. The results may be sketchy, but they are not too distant from historical reality, at least in some respects. Turning a Roman emperor into the son of a gladiator and then killing him off in a duel with a fictional hero are arbitrary, even questionable, plot twists, far from any historical understanding of this era of the Roman Empire. The former aspect, however, is based on ancient rumors about Commodus.³⁹ So, in the long run, it becomes more than clear that Emperor Augustus' earlier aspirations to the purity of Roman stock and his reactionary return to the archaic and traditional but irrevocable *mos maiorum* were destined to be frustrated.⁴⁰ Well before Commodus' birth the Roman Empire had begun to turn into the complex, often uncontrollable melting pot of which Mann's film offers a vivid, if only partial, picture. In this regard Scott's *Gladiator*, perhaps not entirely consciously and despite innumerable historical mistakes, hits the mark in that it depicts a noisy and ethnically diverse urban plebs. This society, even more than the one in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, recalls American society of today. Paradoxically, given the filmmakers' portrayal of their villain, the historical Commodus might well have liked it a lot – much more than his philosophical father, who is engaged in an unlikely struggle to bring Rome back to the glory of the ancient republic.

Neither film – and this is a pity – will awaken any thought of compassion or understanding for Commodus. On the other hand, Mann's wise Marcus Aurelius is unforgettable. So is the brave and far-sighted freedman Timonides, who manages to mediate with the proud, stubborn German peoples. But in line with Hollywood conventions the film needed its villain, and it is no wonder that this part went to Commodus – to the detriment of the real Commodus and his reputation. Even less surprising is Commodus' portrayal in the historically unreliable *Gladiator* – yet more gruesome and sinister, but also more intriguing. And more modern.

³⁹ Reported in the biography of Marcus Aurelius in the *Augustan History* (*AH Marc.* 19.1–7).

⁴⁰ Roman aristocrats, especially matrons, contrived complicated and sometimes paradoxical stratagems in order to elude the trammels of the *lex Iulia* and the *lex Papia Poppaea*. On this cf. my *Le squaldrine impenitenti*, 99–106.

CHAPTER FIVE

East and West in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Jan Willem Drijvers

The Fall of the Roman Empire is generally considered an intelligently made film and the most accomplished screen representation of ancient Rome. Professional classicists and ancient historians tend to rate it highly as well, a remarkable circumstance because such scholars are the least likely to appreciate films set in ancient Greece or Rome. But why they like *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is not quite clear. Is it because the early chapters of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* were its source of inspiration? Is it because the screenwriters had consulted ancient sources – Cassius Dio, Herodian, the *Augustan History*, and the writings of Marcus Aurelius? Is it because of the film's sympathetic message of the unification of all nations, with its clear contemporary overtones? Or is it because of the authenticity of the sets, especially the architecture of the heart of the city of Rome? Whatever their reason or reasons, classicists and historians cannot be impressed by the film because its scriptwriters and director have attempted to make it historically authentic.¹ In spite of its use of ancient sources, the appear-

¹ It has always surprised me that many historians think highly of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* but criticize *Gladiator*, which is greatly indebted to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, for its historical inaccuracies. Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywoods Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), 177–193 and 337–346, compares both films. I would like to thank Theresa Urbainczyk for her comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

ance of historical figures, and the consultation of a historical advisor, from a historical perspective *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is the product of fantasy. Like almost every film set in ancient Rome it has little to do with historical reality. Anthony Mann, its director, was not interested in representing historical truth and considered inaccuracies from a historical point of view unimportant; to him the most important thing was that the audience would get “the feeling of history.”² It is even questionable whether *The Fall of the Roman Empire* “convincingly evokes the social and political atmosphere of the time portrayed.”³ The reign of Commodus was not as dark a period in Roman history as represented in the film.⁴ Many historians now disagree with Gibbon’s verdict that the decline of the Roman Empire started with Commodus and even reject the concept of decline and fall as explanation for the dissolution of the Roman Empire. At the time of the film’s production and release, however, the traditional views of Commodus’ reign and of decline and fall still prevailed.

One of the attractions of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is its break with the simplistic Hollywood tradition of the conflict between Rome as imperial oppressor of Christianity, Judaism, or both, which represent human values and freedom. Anthony Mann was right in observing in his essay on *The Fall of the Roman Empire* that films like *Quo Vadis* and even *Spartacus* give “the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about” but that in fact Christianity was only one feature of the complex and multifaceted Roman society of the second century AD. However, Christianity is subtly present in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The only clear reference to it is the pendant with the *Chi-Rho* sign that the Greek philosopher Timonides wears toward the end. But Marcus Aurelius’ idea about a family of equal nations, which Timonides, the late emperor’s advisor, helps turn into reality, reflects and represents the Christian message of love for one’s neighbor, quite apart from its modern overtones. We see barbarians, Romans, and others happily living together until their dream world is shattered by Commodus’ soldiers. The idea of fraternization, love of one’s fellow-man, and equality is Christian or can at least be interpreted as such. Timonides is the driving force behind this ideal. He can be seen as a kind of apostle propagating and attempting to realize the equality of men in a peaceful

² As he said in “Empire Demolition,” an essay reprinted in this volume. It is not clear from the context what exactly Mann means.

³ Martin M. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154; quotation at 139.

⁴ On Commodus see now Olivier Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 2002).

world, representing Christianity and what it stands for. This becomes evident from the earlier scene in which Timonides is tortured by the Germanic barbarians who want to force him to venerate their god Wotan. In the end, the philosopher cannot endure the pain and gives in, saying: "My faith was not strong enough." This faith can only refer to Christianity because pagans were free to venerate not only a multitude of Greco-Roman gods but also any barbarian gods. Christianity is less understated in this film than is often thought, even if its political concerns are predominant.

Like most historical epics, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is a film of opposites: Romans vs. barbarians, good rule vs. bad rule, tradition vs. renovation, Greek vs. Roman, thinkers vs. non-thinkers, father vs. son, public vs. private, friends vs. enemies, egotism vs. altruism, and so on.⁵ In general there is the antithesis of good and bad, the former personified by Marcus Aurelius, Livius, the emperor's daughter Lucilla, and Timonides; the latter by Commodus and his henchmen. An opposition of West and East is also present. The following pages focus on this antithesis, in particular on the representation of the Orient.

According to Edward Said's influential 1978 study *Orientalism*, "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."⁶ In his view there was a strong dichotomy between East and West. The Orient is a European construct that defines the eastern part of the world and its inhabitants as in every respect different from the Occident. In the Western tradition the Oriental is commonly inferior to the Westerner. The chief characteristic Western assumptions about the Orient are its exoticism, despotism, lawlessness, eroticism, unreliability, riches, and avarice. The inferiority of the Oriental provides the Westerner with the right to colonize the Orient and to rule it culturally, politically, and militarily. The Western view of the Orient is arbitrary because it generalizes and so does injustice to the complexities and realities of Oriental cultures. Orientalism reveals more about the culture that produces it than about the Orient itself.

Said focused mainly on British and French academic writing, travel literature, and novels of the post-Enlightenment period, in particular the nineteenth century. But the polarity between East and West goes back

⁵ Cf. William Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 23–49.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; rpt. New York: Vintage, 2003), 1.

much further.⁷ To Greeks and Romans the Orient, especially the Persian empire, was another world, which differed considerably from their own culturally, socially, and politically. It was a world that they found hard to understand, about which they were prejudiced, and to which they felt superior. Since what has come to be called “the invention of the barbarian” by the Greeks, in particular in Herodotus’ *Histories* and Aeschylus’ tragedy *The Persians*, Greeks and Romans regarded the Persian world as quintessentially barbarian. Gradually the conception developed that Persia in particular and Asia in general were characterized by softness, servility, luxury, autocracy, immorality, and unreliability.⁸ This conception not only described Persian society but also helped shape the Greeks’ and Romans’ self-image as a culturally and morally superior society.⁹

Orientalism as Said defined it is also present in the visual arts and in popular culture. Film is one of the most important products of modern popular culture in which the representation of the Oriental figures prominently. Film inherited from the late nineteenth century “the narrative and visual traditions, as well as the cultural assumptions” about representations of the East as they had developed in the centuries before.¹⁰ Until the present day the iconography of the East and the Easterner in films fits perfectly the Western stereotypical and cultural presuppositions that Said described. The Orient is almost always portrayed in a one-sided and rather limited way, and no difference is made between the various Oriental cultures or between the Islamic or pre-Islamic past of the Near

⁷ Cf. Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8–19.

⁸ On this see especially Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989; rpt. 2004); Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience: From the Archaic Period to the Age of Xenophon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; rpt. 2006), 257–303.

⁹ On the Roman image of Parthia-Persia see, e.g., Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 371–380. For modern scholarship on ancient Persia, including historical sources, see Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia: From 550 B.C. to 650 A.D.*, tr. Azizeh Azodi (London: Tauris, 1996); Maria Brosius, *The Persians* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁰ The quotation is from Matthew Bernstein, “Introduction,” in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (eds.), *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1–18, at 3. See further Gereon Sievernich and Hendrik Budde (eds.), *Europa und der Orient, 800–1900* (exhibition catalogue; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Lexikon Verlag, 1989); and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts (eds.), *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

East. Persians, Arabs, Turks, and other Near Eastern peoples are all tarred with the same cliché-ridden brush.

Movies, and in particular Hollywood movies, not only express but also shape, influence, and confirm our popular culture. In almost all movies the representation of Orientals, mostly Arabs, is static and stereotypic as well as self-perpetuating. They are menacing, money-mad, uncivilized religious fanatics who do not flinch from using violence, even murder, to achieve their goals. Oriental women are either suffering oppression, especially when they are enslaved in harems, or they are eroticized as belly dancers or scantily clad harem ladies.¹¹ This simplistic celluloid mythology emphasizes the dichotomy between East and West and the good Westerner's superiority over the bad Easterner.

In films set in ancient Greece and Rome we encounter this caricature of the Oriental, too. In *The Robe* (1953) the Syrian guide Abidor – dressed, by the way, as an Ottoman Turk with a caftan and bejewelled turban – who is supposed to assist Marcellus in his search for Christ's robe, does everything for money. He is vicious and untrustworthy; he double-crosses his Roman employer and betrays the Christians to the Romans for money. In *Ben-Hur* (1959) Sheik Ilderim – his name is more Turkish than Arabic – is a sympathetic figure who adds some humor to the story. (He cares more about his horses than about his many wives and considers having only one wife to be uncivilized.) But he is anachronistically dressed as a Muslim Arab. The fact that he is called sheik is another anachronism.¹² In *Spartacus* (1960) Tigranes Levantus – note the second part of his name! – is the treacherous Oriental who bargains with Cilician pirates on behalf of Spartacus so that the rebellious slaves can escape from Italy. Tigranes is clearly not interested in the noble cause of Spartacus but only in increasing his wealth. The Cilicians are untrustworthy; they do not show up with their ships to transport the slave army out of Italy because they had been bribed by the Romans. Tigranes is nevertheless still eager to make some money and offers to smuggle Spartacus, his family, and a few close friends out of Italy for a commission. In *Cleopatra* (1963) the Oriental world, in this case Egypt, is presented as extremely wealthy and luxurious. Its villain is the eunuch Pothinus, the regent for Cleopatra's young brother Ptolemy. Cleopatra herself, sometimes scantily dressed, is both an intelligent queen and a sensual woman, focused

¹¹ Cf. Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 1–37.

¹² On the cultural clash between East (Arabs and Jews) and West (Romans) involving Ilderim and Messala see Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema," in Joshel, Malamud, and McGuire (eds.), *Imperial Projections*, 50–76, at 70–72.

on gaining power for Egypt by seducing powerful Romans with her erotic wiles. In *Gladiator* (2000), Maximus is kidnapped by Arab slavers and brought in a camel caravan to Zucchabar in Africa. The scenery is clearly Arabic; Zucchabar resembles an Arab desert fortress. Upon arrival the slave trader, an ugly and unreliable Oriental, offers Maximus to Proximo, the gladiatorial entrepreneur, at a special price. In *Alexander* (2004) the Eastern world is mainly exotic, characterized by polychrome luxury. The women are veiled but licentious. It is a world that fascinates, but it is also a world to be discovered and conquered. The East–West dichotomy is presented most simplistically in *300* (2007), a film about the battle between Spartans and Persians at Thermopylae. The Spartans represent masculinity, courage, honesty, honor, mutual respect, and, above all, freedom; Greek civilization stands for reason and justice. To preserve their freedom, the 300 Spartans are prepared to fight to the death. The Persians on the other hand represent the complete reverse of Greek, that is, Western, values. They are barbarians in every respect. Soulless monsters, they know no honor or respect, and life has no value. They are a degenerate people, and their army is an army of slaves. Some of the Persians wear Arabic-looking garments. King Xerxes is a despotic ruler, who is venerated as a god. He has feminine features which make him appear even more despicable. The Persians exhibit all the bad modern stereotypes one can think of.

The East appears for the first time in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* when Marcus Aurelius discusses an alliance between Rome and Armenia with the Armenian king Sohamus. Marcus wants to protect the empire from danger in the East, the Persian empire.¹³ The Persians, as Marcus Aurelius tells the assembled leaders, are still enemies and so are excluded from the family of equal nations as which he envisions the future: the ideal of “a true *pax Romana*,” the peaceful co-existence of peoples within and outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reflects contemporary circumstances. In the early 1960s the Cold War was at its height, and the Persian empire might well be a stand-in for the Soviet Union.¹⁴ The alliance between Rome and Armenia is to be sealed

¹³ The history of the Persian empire consists of three main phases: the Achaemenid empire (c. 558–330 BC), the Parthian Empire (238 BC–AD 224), and the Sasanian empire (AD 224–651). In the time *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is set, the Romans had to do with the Parthians. That the film refers to Persians instead of Parthians need not have something to do with the likelihood that Parthians were unknown to cinema audiences (so Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 150); even ancient sources use the term Persians to designate Parthians.

¹⁴ Cf. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 150, and Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187.

by the marriage between Sohamus and Lucilla, the daughter of Marcus Aurelius. Lucilla goes along with her father's plan for the sake of the security of the empire and not to disappoint him although she is in love with Livius. Marcus explains to Lucilla why she has to marry for reasons of state:

I have tried to convince myself that my fears for the empire are unreasonable. But my fears *are* reasonable. The East, Lucilla, is where our danger lies. We must make an alliance that will show the whole world what value Rome places on her eastern frontier. An alliance with Armenia.

The kingdom of Armenia, also known in Roman sources as Greater Armenia, comprised the mountainous regions north of Syria and Mesopotamia. It was a buffer state between the Roman Empire and the Persian – Parthian and Sasanian – empire. Control over Armenia was of great importance to both superpowers for safeguarding their interests in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Asia Minor. It is therefore not surprising that Rome and Parthia and later the Sasanian empire contended for dominance over Armenia. It had been a Roman protectorate for some time in the first century BC, but after the death of Augustus in AD 14 it became a source of contention between Rome and Parthia since both wanted possession of Armenia. In AD 63 a temporary compromise was reached with the ascension of Tiridates to the Armenian throne; he had close ties with the Parthian ruling dynasty but also professed friendship to Rome. In the second century the struggle over dominance of Armenia continued. In 117 Armenia had for a short time been a Roman province as a result of the eastern conquests of Emperor Trajan. In the 150s tensions increased again over control of Armenia, and in the early 160s the Parthian king Vologases III installed his own candidate, Pacorus, on the Armenian throne.

In the years 162–166 Lucius Verus, co-emperor with Marcus Aurelius, fought a successful campaign against the Parthians. His conquests were extensive, and he managed to conquer and destroy many Parthian cities and strongholds, among them the important cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. In 166 Parthia capitulated. In 165 Verus had put a Roman nominee by the name of Caius Iulius Sohaemus on the Armenian throne.¹⁵ A ninth-century source gives some interesting information

¹⁵ On this see, e.g., Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 B.C. –A.D. 337* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; rpt. 1996), 112–113; Anthony R. Birley, "Hadrian to the Antonines," in Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Dominic Rathbone (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 11: *The High Empire, A.D. 70–192* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132–194, at 158 and 164.

about him: "Soaimos the Achaemenid and Arsacid, who is a king and descendant of kings, but is also a member of the Senate in Rome, and consul, and then again king of Greater Armenia."¹⁶ Although he was driven out by the Parthians in 172, Sohaemus was restored to the throne by Roman forces.¹⁷ It is not known whether he still ruled Armenia when Commodus was emperor. Like his counterpart in the film, the historical Sohaemus was of eastern origin, although it is not likely that he was a Persian, as the words *Achaemenid* and *Arsacid* in the quotation given above imply. He had good relations with Rome as well, as is evident from the fact that he was a senator of consular rank. It may well be that the scriptwriters, who are known to have done serious historical research, were inspired by the historical Sohaemus for their Armenian king Sohamus. However, from a historical perspective it is unthinkable that the Armenian king was in the company of Marcus Aurelius at the Danube frontier, where we first see him in the film. Nor was there a political marriage between him and the emperor's daughter Lucilla. Lucilla was married to Lucius Verus in late 163 or 164, and after his death in 169 she married a certain Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus. But the invented political marriage between Sohamus and Lucilla makes it obvious that control over Armenia was of great importance for Rome to protect its interests in the East and to keep the Persians at bay. While the film suggests that Rome had serious conflicts with Armenia and Parthia during the reign of Commodus, the ancient sources reveal no such information. The campaign of Lucius Verus was probably so effective that the Parthians were no longer a threat to Rome for several decades. So there is no reason to suppose that serious Persian–Roman conflicts and fighting took place under Commodus as shown in the film. Parthia was not a great power any more at the end of the second century, and Roman troops were stationed in Armenia to protect Roman interests.¹⁸ Only in 194–198 was there another Parthian campaign, undertaken by Emperor Septimius Severus. His successful expedition made Mesopotamia a Roman province.

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the cause of the eastern rebellion is Commodus' ruthless exploitation of the Roman provinces in the East.

¹⁶ Photius, *Bibliotheca* 94. My quotation is from the translation in Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 489.

¹⁷ Dio 71.2.3.

¹⁸ Inscriptions (*CIL* III, 6052; *CIG* III, 6559) inform us about Roman troops stationed in Armenia. See also Marie-Louise Chaumont, "L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran: I. De l'avènement d'Auguste à l'avènement de Dioclétien," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 2.9.1 (1976), 71–194, at 151.

The rebels are supported by the Roman armies and their commanders. Commodus then appoints Livius to suppress the uprising. Livius, a fictional character who represents the ideal virtuous Roman, condemns the revolution and the revolutionary military commanders; he considers the uprising an act of treason against Rome and what it stands for. He is, however, in for a surprise when he discovers that Lucilla, the woman he loves, supports the insurgence and is one of the driving forces behind it:

- LUCILLA: Livius, o Livius. The gods were kind to us. They sent you, you, *you*.
- LIVIOUS: You are part of this, Lucilla?
- LUCILLA: I am a *great* part of this.
- LIVIOUS: Part of rebellion!
- LUCILLA: We are breaking away from Rome. We will make our own empire here in the East, an *Eastern* empire.
- LIVIOUS: An Eastern empire? You will make chaos. What will hold you together? What will you do but to *fight* the empire?
- LUCILLA: But not if *you* join us, Livius. We will have all of Rome greater than ever.
- LIVIOUS: What have you done, Lucilla?
- LUCILLA: I am trying to prevent the disaster my brother has set upon us.
- LIVIOUS: There may be a great deal wrong with what Commodus has done, but this is not the way to oppose him. I cannot let you destroy the empire.
- LUCILLA: Cannot? *Cannot*? If you cannot join us, then take your army back to Rome. Let us make our own destiny here.
- LIVIOUS: And let rebellion go unpunished?
- LUCILLA: *I* am part of this rebellion.

Historical sources reveal that Lucilla was indeed involved in a conspiracy against her brother Commodus in 182.¹⁹ But it took place in Rome and for reasons quite different from those presented in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Moreover, the plot was discovered, and Lucilla was first exiled to Capri and then executed. The eastern rebellion in the film is historical fiction. No such revolt took place during Commodus' reign; the same is true for the alleged heavy taxing and squeezing dry of the eastern provinces to finance Commodus' excessive gladiatorial games and to free

¹⁹ Dio 72.4; Herodian 1.8; *Augustan History: Commodus* 4–5.

Rome from a serious famine. The rebellion is predicted twice, first when Commodus announces that he will raise taxes in order to organize his games and again when Lucilla tells Commodus that the eastern provinces will rise against his policies.

What led the screenwriters to come up with an eastern rebellion? Two actual uprisings may have served as inspiration. In the spring of 175 Avidius Cassius, governor of Syria, revolted and usurped imperial power when Marcus Aurelius was said to be seriously ill and everyone feared for his life. Syria, Palestine, and Egypt acknowledged Avidius as new emperor. However, Marcus Aurelius took immediate action, and by the end of July the rebellion was over.²⁰ A more probable source of inspiration may have been Zenobia's revolt some one hundred years later. In 270 Zenobia, queen of Palmyra, took advantage of the region's political instability to revolt. Within a short period of time she took control over Syria, Egypt, and much of Asia Minor. Her aim was probably to become independent of Rome and to have her own Eastern empire.²¹ Two years later Emperor Aurelian crushed her revolt. The character of Lucilla in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* resembles Zenobia, for like her Lucilla was heavily involved in the eastern rebellion and intended to have an independent Eastern empire. And both are desert queens. Zenobia was ruler over the desert city of Palmyra, Lucilla is also an eastern desert queen: she is dressed as such and lives in the desert in a sort of Bedouin tent when Livius visits her. This luxurious tent suggests that Lucilla leads the life of a nomad. The Orient is often identified with nomadic life, which since antiquity has been considered as less civilized than an existence characterized by permanent residence in towns or cities.

The revolt in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* might have succeeded had not Sohamus violated the truce with Rome and defected from the Romans to the Persians. Sohamus, an Easterner with a dark skin, dark hair, and rich clothes and played by an actor from Egypt, exemplifies oriental unreliability.²² His treachery and the sudden appearance of the Persian

²⁰ Birley, "Hadrian to the Antonines," 176–181; Hekster, *Commodus*, 34–37.

²¹ On this see Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992; rpt. 1994), 155–180. Cf. further Peter M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia: The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²² In the film this is only a short scene with a two-sentence dialogue between Lucilla and her husband. Lucilla: "You have violated the truce." Sohamus: "We have done more than that, Lucilla. We have joined the Persians." The novel based on the film provides a motive for Sohamus' defection: "The truth I must face. Armenia belongs to the Orient.' . . . Lucilla's face was white. 'What does that mean?' Sohamus spoke levelly. 'Armenia will join the Persians.'" Quoted from Harry Whittington, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1964), 156.

army lead the rebellious eastern Roman armies to join Livius in their common fight against the Persians. "It is Romans against Persians," one of the rebellious commanders remarks. The message is clear: the West, united, must withstand the threat from the East.

Screenwriters and director made no attempt to show the battle between the Roman and Persian armies in a historically reliable way. Neither a Roman nor a Persian army would have gone into battle in such a disorganized, even chaotic, way as we see them do. The battle has a distinct Western-film style, with "cavalry clashing in a rocky desert, horses falling, spears and arrows flying through the air, and Western stunts" such as men leaping down from rocks onto cavalry soldiers.²³ The Persian army is shown as a mass of anonymous soldiers, and no individuals can be distinguished, not even military commanders or the Persian king himself. It is likely that the Persian army is deliberately represented as a horde of exotic, alien, and menacing barbarians. Keeping the enemy anonymous prevents viewers from developing any sympathy with their cause or side.²⁴ Although the Persian army is presented as an impersonal mass and the battle is historically inaccurate, the Persian soldiers and in particular the cavalry are presented in a reasonably authentic way. As visualized in the film, the Persian cavalry were mail-clad horsemen armed with spears. These *catafracti* (or *catafractarii*) were much feared by the Romans.²⁵

When the huge battle is over, apparently ending in a victory of the Romans, we see Livius and Lucilla, now reconciled again, and Roman troops traveling through the East. It is unclear whether they are traveling through the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire or through Persia. Livius meets Commodus' envoys Didius Julianus and Pescennius Niger, who offer him co-emperorship on the condition that he punish the eastern rebels by crucifying 5,000 inhabitants of every town and city. (We actually see people having been crucified on the screen.) This may suggest that they are within the boundaries of the empire.²⁶ But the spectacular scenery tells us otherwise. In the background we see a palace or, more likely, a city whose architecture is reminiscent of Persian and Mesopotamian architecture from the first centuries AD. The architecture shown is a tall vaulted hall with a wide arched opening and reminds us

²³ Quoted from Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 150.

²⁴ Cf. Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 150.

²⁵ On these mail-clad horsemen see Mariusz Mielczarek, *Catafracti and Clibanarii: Studies on the Heavy Armoured Cavalry of the Ancient World* (Łódź: Oficyna Maukowa, 1993), with illustrations.

²⁶ In a film made with so much care it is rather clumsy that the envoys address Livius as "Parthius." It should be "Parthicus," meaning "Conqueror of the Parthians."

of the *iwan* façade of the Palace at Assur from the first century AD or of buildings such as the Tāq-I Kisrā, the residence of the Sasanian kings in Ctesiphon (modern Baghdad).²⁷ The city walls at both sides of the vaulted hall recall the fortress walls of Durnali in Margiana in central Asia, perhaps even the architecture of the Ishtar Gate at Babylon.²⁸ The rocky background is also revealing. We see not just rocky mountains but rocks embellished with reliefs. In the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods of Persian history rock reliefs were important as markers of royal graves or royal ideology and triumph. Among other decorations we see a rider, probably a Persian cavalry soldier; such a depiction is known from Parthian and Sasanian rock reliefs and domestic objects such as silver plates. We furthermore see on a high rock a rectangular relief, which is somewhat reminiscent of the Naqš-I Rostam relief in central Persia.²⁹ Scattered on the ground are large stone heads, clearly inspired by those of the colossal statues of gods, goddesses, and kings on the mountain of Nemrud Dagh in the Roman client-kingdom of Commagene in modern south-east Turkey. The scene creates in an intelligent way an Eastern atmosphere but is unspecific as to its location and time. The water we notice in the background at the beginning of the scene might refer to the river Euphrates and suggests the border region between the Roman and Persian empires.

The film is not always as authentic in picturing the East as in the scene just described. The East is sometimes anachronistically depicted as Arabic. Lucilla's tent is an example, and so are the guardians at its entrance. They are only briefly visible when Sohamus arrives to tell Lucilla that he has defected to the Persians. The two black guards resemble Arabs or nomadic Tuaregs with their black headscarves and scimitars. So the stereotypical perspective of the Orient is still on view in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* even if it is not as obvious as in most Hollywood films. But what is most fascinating about this film and its depiction of the Orient is not so much how it shows us the East as rather how Rome and Commodus are orientalized. Commodus rules as an Eastern despot. He lives in decadence in his luxurious palace, and he is dressed in oriental

²⁷ See Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, Plate XXV; also Malcolm A. R. Colledge, *Parthian Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), Plate 2. The *iwan*, an architectural form characterized by high vaulted halls and large arched openings and used for temples, first appeared in the Parthian period, probably in the first century AD; cf. Colledge, *Parthian Art*, 47–48.

²⁸ For the former cf. Colledge, *Parthian Art*, 30.

²⁹ E.g. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, Plate Xa.

style in un-Roman gilded robes.³⁰ He considers himself divine and wants to be venerated as a god by his people. Commodus' emergence from a gigantic hand of Sabazius in the middle of the Roman Forum near the end of the film is almost like an epiphany. The Roman people, in particular those in the provinces, are treated as servants or slaves rather than as free citizens and are squeezed dry in order to finance Commodus' pleasures. Corruption has become a normal matter among Roman soldiers, senators, and imperial courtiers. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the Orient has come to Rome at the cost of Roman virtue, liberty, simplicity, honesty, and reason. In the words of one Roman senator who supports Commodus' oppressive measures: "Equality, freedom, peace – who is it that uses these words but Greeks and Jews and slaves?" The Roman Empire has become like an oriental state. Its people are oppressed instead of integrated, they cannot live peacefully anymore. There is no respect for others, and corruption is rampant. In such a state people have no faith anymore, and the noble aspirations of Marcus Aurelius are dead and gone. In such a state decent citizens can only walk away, as Livius and Lucilla do at the end. This kind of state will eventually decline and fall.

³⁰ Cf. Junkelmann, *Hollywoods Traum von Rom*, 338. By representing Commodus in this way the filmmakers have kept close to the ancient sources, which also portray Commodus rather like a decadent oriental ruler.

CHAPTER SIX

Empire Demolition

Anthony Mann

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following description of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by its director first appeared in the British journal *Films and Filming*, 10 no. 6 (March, 1964), 7–8, and was reprinted in Richard Koszarski (ed.), *Hollywood Directors 1941–1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 332–338. It is here reproduced from its original publication, which included a small (and cropped) photograph of Mann with a model of the Roman Forum, holding a volume of Gibbon, and a still of a scene set in the Forum from near the film's end. The issue's cover also featured the film, showing a moment from the reunion of Commodus and Livius, and a small image of a Roman eagle with *fasces*. Mann's article, the first in this issue, is referred to on the cover as "Demolishing an Empire." In either version the title's glibness contradicts the seriousness of Mann's text and was most likely not Mann's choice. It is probable that the journal's editorial staff supplied it. Below, editorial comments appear in square brackets; typographical errors have been silently corrected. British spelling has been preserved; so has the punctuation mark after *Quo Vadis* although this version of Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel omitted it on purpose. Mann's reference to the edition of Gibbon that he read is imprecise and probably based on rather loose recollection. Various abridgments in one or more volumes existed that Mann may have seen.

Mann's text makes evident that, while he was no expert in Roman history – no director ever was or is likely to be – he and his screenwriters did a large amount of historical research, although not with the purpose to have it overshadow or negate what they saw as the main purpose of their epic film: a story about the past which says something about the present. Mann's previous film,

El Cid (1961), and this text about his second historical epic both reveal that he believed in the value of the past for the present. Mann was probably unfamiliar with Cicero's *historia magistra vitae* ("history is the teacher of life"; *On the Orator* 2.9.36), but *The Fall of the Roman Empire* amply bears out that he agreed with his maxim.

The reason for making *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is that it is as modern today as it was in the history that Gibbon wrote: if you read Gibbon, like reading Churchill, it is like seeing the future as well as the past. The future is the thing that interested me in the subject. The past is like a mirror; it reflects what actually happened, and in the reflexion of the fall of Rome are the same elements in what is happening today, the very things that are making our empires fall.

I did not want to make another *Quo Vadis?* (which I worked on, by the way; I did all the burning of Rome in that picture in 1950 – I was the night shift), another *Spartacus* or any of the others because these stories were the stories of the Christ. Those films gave the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about, but it was a minor incident in the greatness of the Roman Empire.

This is not a film based on Gibbon. No film could digest his *Decline and Fall*. I have not even read the complete Gibbon (it would take my lifetime to read); but the inspiration was the Oxford concise edition of some fifteen hundred pages. Not only having read Gibbon, but having also read Edith Hamilton's *The Roman Way*, William Durant's *Caesar and Christ*, Plutarch's *Lives*, *Caesar's Wars* and many more, I came across one very exciting thing about the period, which made our storyline possible. All the historians spoke of the creativity of Rome. It was one of the great adventures of all history – Rome gave us greater law, greater understanding, greater concepts of peoples. All the historians picked the time of Marcus Aurelius as the beginning of the end.

Edith Hamilton did it through writers. She said that all creativity of writers and of law ceased to be after the end of Marcus Aurelius' age. Gibbon used Christianity as his great enemy of Rome. In Durant, *Caesar and Christ* were the two great figures, *Caesar* the beginning and *Christ* the end: but he did something that Gibbon didn't do, he said that this was the resurrection of the Roman Empire, because out of it came the *Papacy* and Rome today is as alive as it was in those days.

Whether you accept such theories or not is another matter. What we wanted to do was to find a point where we could start the picture. A spectacle film is only as good as the internal story, the development of characters that people can understand and accept. Aurelius' life was a

fantastic one. He had two children. He had a son, Commodus, who destroyed everything that Marcus Aurelius did and this was the beginning of the end; from then on there were thirty Emperors and Rome became a dictatorship put up by the military. His daughter, Lucilla, fought very hard to uphold everything that Aurelius believed and tried almost to create an Eastern Empire with him. It is a story of a family; it is the story we tell against this terrific background of Rome, which internally starts to destroy itself. Our theme, which is essentially that of Durant's book, is that no civilisation can be destroyed from without, but it destroys itself from within.

As Hadrian trained Aurelius to become an Emperor, so Aurelius trained other men to be Emperors; but he did not feel that his son was right for such authority. In the old days Nero and Caligula had merely inherited the throne and at its height, the Roman Senate decided this was no longer healthy for the empire; so that the Golden Age of Rome was the hundred years when there was no war, the only time in the history of the world when this was so. We picked this climactic moment to open our film. There were many places where we could have started it, but as we wanted to tell the Roman story and not the Christian story we went to the time of Rome's greatness.

The film was originally my idea. I was walking down Piccadilly and I passed Hatchards bookshop and saw the Oxford concise edition of *The Decline and Fall* in the window. I had just finished *El Cid* and I said to myself, 'Now that would make an interesting picture.' Samuel Bronston wanted me to direct another epic picture for him, so I took him the subject and said I had no idea what the story was going to be but would he let me work on it.

Basilio Franchina, a fine Italian writer, did an enormous amount of research for me; and it was he and Ben Barzman who did the original work on a script. After several discussions we all agreed that this was the period we wanted to concentrate on. We found fantastic and interesting things that are so modern today. For instance, when Aurelius was up in the northern frontier trying to stop the barbarians invading, all he wanted to do was to capture their leaders and try to convince them to live as Romans. He made an experiment by taking twenty thousand barbarians and putting them on Roman soil and treating them as Romans, trying to teach them to be Romans so that there need be no more barriers or frontiers if they could only be made to understand. But the experiment was a failure. It was one of the many failures that made it impossible for Rome to survive. Contraception – because the barbarians were breeding like the Chinese today, while the Romans were not.

The laws that the Senate worked under were as modern as today's laws. Yet the Senate at one time could be bought, the armies could be bought: and that marked the beginning of the end.

The reason I wanted to make *El Cid* was the theme "a man rode out to victory dead on a horse"; I loved the concept of that ending. Everybody would love to do this in life.

I found on *El Cid* that Spain is great for locations because there are so many different kinds of country. It is ideal for making a spectacle film. But one must be careful not to let the concept of the spectacular run away with you. In *Fall of the Roman Empire* I have concentrated in the first part on establishing the characters in simple, human terms – meeting characters doing the things that they did in those days, the sacrifice of a bird or simple things that we ourselves would do in our everyday lives. Then the spectacle is done entirely differently to what you would expect, because the whole of the Empire comes to Marcus Aurelius in the mountains with all their different-coloured chariots, their different religions and so on; and he makes a speech to them, and the speech is what the empire *was* – so that in very simple terms we show the empire and its vastness through the eyes of one man. The story is told through the eyes of individuals rather than having chunks of spectacle and little characters in between. The first half of the picture is an intimate story of life and death, and the characters bring you into the spectacle rather than it being imposed on you without dramatic reason.

In the film we have Sir Alec Guinness, James Mason, Stephen Boyd, Sophia Loren, Mel Ferrer, Anthony Quayle and a newcomer to most cinemagoers, Christopher Plummer, who plays the destructive son, Commodus, opposite Guinness' Aurelius. Plummer, I believe, is one of the great new actors, capable – and this is so important in a spectacle – of making the character as big emotionally as the physical impacts of sets, costumes, crowds of people and breathtaking locations.

But characters can only come from good writing; and I believe if you are going to use a writer you must use all his talent, and all his talent is not all his talent if you impose something upon him. So once we had decided the focal point for our film, I left Barzman and Franchina free to construct a script about the people and the period. It was a 350-page treatment. They knew the kind of feeling I wanted because they had worked on *El Cid*. They could write anything; I didn't mind how wild it went. [Producer Samuel] Bronston's script supervisor, Philip Yordan, would come in once in a while to inspire the boys to make this the best picture that has ever been – we were all trying to make a great film.

After this first draft we worked very closely together on formalising the characters, to make them living beings. We actually wrote six scripts. Even the sixth script, which I finally used as my 'hanger,' developed itself while we were shooting. This writing took us more than one year. We did not have artists in mind when we were writing; but we wanted characters with memorable scenes to attract artists of the calibre of Guinness to want to play them.

I believe in the very simplest dialogue. I have seen nearly all of Shakespeare's plays. This is *the* great writer [emphasis added]. But take *Julius Caesar* and you will find tremendous inaccuracies from an historical point of view; but these are not important. The most important thing is that you get the feeling of history. The actual facts, very few people know. If you find out from some obscure historian that Aurelius had curly hair, does it matter if the actor playing him has straight hair? But you cannot change the actual event.

We have tried to use the most simple and primitive English, void of cliché and slang. I think we were successful up to a point with *El Cid*. Unless you have a poet, a man really steeped in words, who knows the value of words and the language of words, you are better off with the minimum of dialogue. The words don't make the picture, anyway. If you asked anybody, however devoted they are to films, what a character said they will never be able to tell you; but I guarantee you they will be able to tell you what the character did, where he was going, or what the pictorial movement was. It is the image that really drives home a point. The words are only there to supplement the picture. Shakespeare needed the words to create the image. His stage was not like our stage. For us, the image is always there.

One must be very careful of words. A word can destroy an image. There is constantly a need to be careful what words to exclude, rather than add. The word is on the soundtrack, it is away from the picture, it is vital that what you see is real, rather than what you hear.

I have made films for four-hundred thousand dollars and for sixteen million dollars; and I have enjoyed making both. I shall not make another 'big' film for a little while. The final arbiter, for all its size and complexity, has to be you; it is in front of you, you see it, and only the way you see it is the way you want it to be. A director who is not physically A-I cannot make this kind of film. I have a rigorous doctor's report on myself before I get involved in one of Mr. Bronston's epics: I must be fit, able and willing.

My next film – much smaller in physical size – I am setting up with my own company. It is a war story, *The Unknown Battle* [released as *The*

Heroes of Telemark, 1965], for which the Norwegian Government has given us fantastic co-operation because it is one of their great stories [of World War II], and the British Government, which was closely concerned, has given us a great deal of help in research. *Men in War* [1957] and *God's Little Acre* [1958] I had also done with my own companies. The new film derives from two books, *Skis Against the Atom* [by Knut Haukelid, originally published in 1953] and *But for These Men* [by John Drummond, 1962], and Ben Barzman is again associated with me as writer.

I believe in the nobility of the human spirit. It is that for which I look in a subject I am to direct. I do not believe that everybody is bad, that the whole world is wrong. The greatness of Shakespeare's plays is the nobility of the human spirit, even though he may destroy the character. And the same with Greek tragedy. Or a modern drama like *The Longest Day* [the 1962 film about D-Day], in which the united human spirit was destroying something that was going to destroy the world. Why is the American Western film such a success throughout the world? It is because a man says "I am going to do something" – and does it: we all want to be heroes. This is what drama is. This is what pictures are all about. I don't believe in anything else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Excerpts from the American Souvenir Program of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following texts first appeared in the unpaginated "Souvenir Book" for Samuel Bronston's production of Anthony Mann's film (New York: National Publishers, 1964; 38 pages, including a fold-out). Certain typographical and lay-out features of the original texts are not reproduced here, but inconsistencies have been preserved except for the letters "b.c." and "a.d." accompanying dates in the second excerpt, which have been capitalized. Illustrations accompanying the texts, omitted here, are chiefly film stills, production photographs, and, in the prologue, a color photograph of Will Durant on the set of the Roman Forum.

Samuel Bronston Productions also published a brochure (unpaginated, 28 pages) about the film in London, presumably for the English-speaking market outside the United States. Only four pages have short descriptive texts (no authors identified). The first pages refers to "Dr. Will Durant, the eminent historian," who is quoted as calling the film "illuminatingly true to history." This seems to be more of a publicist's than a historian's verdict. A second quotation from Durant about Sophia Loren (if it is one and not a publicist's stunt) is better left unquoted. The brochure is included, at greatly reduced size, in the film's Limited Collector's Edition DVD set published in 2008.

In the American Souvenir Book the description of the Roman Forum and of the film's set immediately follows the Prologue. It is the longest text in the booklet, with a large three-page color fold-out photograph of the Forum set and a quotation from Gibbon. Only this prologue is credited to an author; all other texts are unsigned. It is, however, likely that the designers and architects of the Forum set, John Moore and Veniero Colasanti, contributed to the text on the Forum and that

historian Will Durant either wrote the epilogue (the most probable case not least because of its stylistic echoes of Gibbon, Durant's model), was involved in its writing, or at least inspired it. The epilogue adapts and quotes, if without reference, from the last page of text in Durant's book on Roman history: *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 672. The chapter's title is "Epilogue"; its final section is "The Roman Achievement." In it Durant applies, as he does in slightly different wording in the souvenir program, a famous line from Horace to fit the circumstance that a captured but civilized Rome captured its Germanic conquerors; cf. Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.157, about Greece and Rome.

The letter of King Theodahad referred to in the history of the Forum is preserved by Cassiodorus, *Variae* 10.30, but it does not concern "crumbling monuments and temples" but only crumbling statues of elephants. The stretch which the truth here had to endure, although not entirely a distortion of fact, makes for a dramatic transition from the past to the present. In his prologue Durant, too, comes perilously close to abandoning the path of truth when he observes, no doubt in deference to the film's plot, that Marcus Aurelius "neglected to choose and train a successor" when in fact Marcus had chosen Commodus as his co-emperor four years before he died.

The set of the Forum came close to finding a second life on screen when director Richard Lester and his designer were considering it for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). But "they concluded that the cost of keeping the scaffolding in place was going to be higher than building a new set. They found another area thirty miles outside of Madrid that was more in keeping with their proposed style. Rather than attempt to duplicate the grandeur that was Rome in its heyday, they wanted it to look more like . . . a small village . . . – a working village, all higgledy-piggledy and authentic." Quoted from Andrew Yule, *The Man Who "Framed" the Beatles: A Biography of Richard Lester* (New York: Fine, 1994), 112. Lester made the right decision. The Forum set received a kind of posthumous honor when it made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

1. A Prologue by Will Durant

The Roman Empire was one of the miracles of history. Picture a city on the Tiber ruling Italy, North Africa, Egypt, Arabia Petraea, Judea, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, the Crimea, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Albania, Austria, Germany, Holland, Belgium, England, France, Switzerland, Spain, and Portugal; all these were in the Roman Empire in the second century of our era. A hundred famous cities flourished under Roman rule: Carthage, Sicilian Syracuse and Palermo, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Damascus, Constantinople, Sofia, Athens, Sparta, Budapest, Vienna, Belgrade, Cologne, London, Bath, Paris, Toulouse,

Bordeaux, Lisbon, Cadiz, Seville, Cordova, Toledo, Barcelona, Marseilles, Nice, Genoa, Milan, Florence, Ravenna, Naples; what other empire has had so many jewels in its crown?

That Empire had been formed through four centuries by piecemeal conquest or peaceable absorption, by subtle statesmanship, disciplined armies, superior generals, tougher character. For two hundred years the provinces were exploited, plundered, misruled; then for two hundred years – from Augustus in the time of Christ to Marcus Aurelius – those provinces enjoyed the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace of orderly government under the greatest system of law ever known. Rome built roads – 1,300 miles of them in France alone, 5,000 miles in little England. Rome gave to vast populations an unprecedented security of life, property, industry, and trade. It gave a common language to Western Europe – a Latin that survives, beautiful in its diverse corruption, in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and all Latin America. Rome transmitted, from Greece and Italy to all of the provinces, the finest forms of poetry, philosophy, and art; noble architecture rose from Bath in England to Baalbek in Lebanon. Provincial authors like Philo, Plutarch, and Strabo sang the praises of Roman rule; alien states begged for admission to the burdens and blessings of Roman law and peace; men of a hundred different nations, from Spaniards like Seneca to Jews like St. Paul, were proud to call themselves Roman citizens.

There were many blots on the Imperial record. There was slavery or serfdom in lordly palaces and on immense farms; there were occasional persecutions of Christians; and in the first century there were degenerate tyrants like Nero and Caligula. But in the year 96 there began a succession of philosophers – kings [*sic*] – Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius – who raised Imperial administration to such a height of conscience and competence that historians have agreed in calling those eighty-four years the golden age of government. [French historian Ernest] Renan termed Antoninus Pius “the most perfect sovereign that ever reigned”; and Gibbon pronounced the “united reigns” of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius – from 138 to 180 – “the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government.”

These rulers, with one exception, followed the system of adoptive monarchy: that is, the emperor, instead of passing the power on to his son, adopted and trained, as his successor, whichever one of his aides seemed best fitted to rule. Our story stems from the one exception.

It was a tragedy for Marcus Aurelius that his wife Faustina (if we may believe the Roman historians) was repeatedly unfaithful to him, and that

some doubt arose as to the father of her son Commodus. It was a tragedy for Aurelius and for Rome that, though he was a Stoic philosopher as well as a good ruler, he was forced to spend so much of his reign defending the Empire against the multiplying barbarians who were pressing against the frontiers. And it was a tragedy for Rome that amid the turmoil of these campaigns Marcus Aurelius neglected to choose and train a successor, and that, caught by death at the age of fifty-eight, he allowed the brave but foolish, cruel, and despotic Commodus to inherit the most complex government that history has ever known.

Out of a hundred factors in the decline and fall of Rome our picture chooses two: the pressure of the barbarians upon the frontiers, and the tragic reign of the half-insane Commodus. In the year 180 the ailing father and the presumptive, presumptuous son were leading Roman legions against Germanic tribes along the Danube between Singidunum, which is now Belgrade, and Vindobonum, which became Vienna. Let the play go on!

2. The Roman Forum: In Ruins Today . . . and Re-Created

It had always been the haunt of legend and when the first shepherds came down from the Roman hills they found it a place of pools and marshland peopled by the gods of the pagans and the spirits of the dead of imagined battles.

From the rude villages on the hilltops surrounding the valley they watched the waters of the river Tiber rising to flood it but even then, in the mists of antiquity, its destiny was clear for it lay at the heart of the settlements as it would one day lie at the heart of the greatest empire the world has ever known.

More than 2500 years ago the royal family of the Tarquins, who set Rome on the first faltering steps to imperial glory, drained the valley with a channel called the Cloaca Maxima which returned its waters to the Tiber. A few merchants then set up stalls but this was too hallowed a spot to remain purely commercial. Was it not here, in the shadows of the fabled past, that Romulus, who gave his name to Rome, had done battle with Titus Tatius after the rape of the Sabine women?

So although the shops remained the temples began to rise before them – the Temple of Saturn in 497 B.C. and the Temple of Castor in 484 B.C. and the chapel of the two-headed Janus whose doors were shut only when Rome was at peace with the world – a rare condition in the turbulent days of the ancients.

The decades passed and history began to set the pattern of what would be called the Forum Romanum: a rim of open-fronted shops enclosing the cold beauties of the temples and within them a great square, a meeting place for the populace to vote in, to stroll in, to hear public pronouncements or to witness the deeds of the immortals whose names have come down to us through the centuries.

You see the Forum, re-created for “The Fall of the Roman Empire” at the moment of its supreme splendour in the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and his son, Commodus, in the second century A.D. There had been other Forums on the same site before it and there were to be others afterwards but none of them ever achieved the same magnificence.

The Gauls invaded Rome and destroyed the first of all the Forums in 390 B.C. This was quite natural for a time when conquest was synonymous with destruction and death or slavery. It would happen again and again but always the shops and temples and official buildings would rise from the ruins until its final reincarnation, miraculously on the plains of Spain, for this film, a purpose not even its soothsayers could have divined when they examined the entrails of their sacrifices for their omens.

The Forum is a star of our film because almost everything of importance to Rome and the Empire either happened or had repercussions in it. It was there that laws were made and justice dispensed. Politicians harangued the crowds from the Rostra – a speaker’s platform decorated originally in 338 B.C. with the rostra, or bronze beaks, of the ships captured by the Consul Gaius Maenius when he defeated the Latin fleet at Antium. Cicero spoke there and Mark Antony delivered from it his funeral oration over the slain body of Julius Caesar.

The grand funerals were held in the Forum and religious processions and triumphal entries into the city. It was the scene of sacrifices to the gods, fantastic public banquets – one of which had more than 20,000 guests – public executions, gladiatorial combats and lavish spectacles in which it was converted into a vast theatre lit at night by hundred of torches. It was a battleground in the bloody civil war between Marius and Sulla.

At times of national crisis the people flocked to it to hear the reassurances of their emperor or political leaders. And so Rome’s rulers, to help secure their fame for posterity, raised temples and arches and statues within it – the temples of Augustus, Vespasian, Antoninus Pius, the arches of Augustus, Septimius Severus and Titus, the basilica of Maxentius.

Fire, by accident or at the hand of invaders, was more of an enemy to the Forum than the ravages of time. The rebuilding by Gaius Maenius

endured only until 210 B.C. when flames in the wooden portions of the temples swept through it. After the victory over Hannibal (who once crossed the Alps on elephants) in 201 B.C. an even more imposing Forum was erected.

The playwright Plautus spent some of his time there about 180 B.C. and in his comedy "Curculio" gives a satirical description of the cliques who used it for their own particular gathering place – perjurers and braggarts, for example, in the Comitium where the magistrates sat; bankers, brokers and bawds in front of the basilica; thieves and vagabonds behind the temple of Castor and "walking in the lower Forum you will meet good men and rich."

Then in 52 B.C. the popular hero Clodius was killed in combat by the followers of Milo and mourners carried his body to the Forum where they improvised a funeral pyre from the benches of the magistrates and senators with more emotion than caution. A wind scattered the sparks that kindled another destructive fire. But by now, Caesar, away at the wars in Gaul, was sending dispatches to his friends asking them to aid in its restoration.

There is a letter from Cicero complaining that he and another of Caesar's cronies had to haggle with profiteering landlords in their effort to buy land that would extend the Forum. Eventually Caesar came home and poured the booty of the Gallic Wars into the reconstruction program, hurrying it as though he had a premonition he would not live to see it completed. He dedicated two of his buildings even before they were finished. A few months later, March 15, 44 B.C., he was assassinated.

Augustus Caesar and Tiberius continued the plan. Nero's fiddling may be merely a tradition but his fire was grim reality and its edges scorched the Forum on July 19, 64 A.D. The reign of the "Emperor of Pleasure" Carinus in the third century was marred by a fire as spectacular as the theatres and circuses he staged – and the Forum was no more.

Diocletian, Maxentius and Constantine rebuilt it but it never really recovered from the invasion of Alaric and his Goths who plundered – and, of course, burned – Rome in 410 A.D. There was a halfhearted attempt at another restoration which was still underway in 442 A.D. when, according to Paulus, "Rome was visited by such a terrible earthquake that many temples and porticos collapsed" – those in the Forum among them.

In 535 A.D. King Theodahad, wistful of its past glories, asked the Prefect of the city, Honorius, whether anything could be done about the mass of crumbling monuments and temples.

The answer must have been negative. Christians took over some of the ancient buildings for churches but the ruins increased and another earthquake in the eighth century was all but fatal. Marble merchants and operators of lime kilns moved in to be near so provident a source of supply and even the few landmarks still remaining would have disappeared by now had not archaeologists, aghast at the despoliation of a priceless heritage of all mankind, started scientific excavations less than 200 years ago.

In the autumn of 1960 Producer Samuel Bronston contemplating a film of "The Fall of the Roman Empire" consulted with Executive Associate producer Michael Waszynski on the artistic and technical problems involved. Later, to his celebrated designers Veniero Colasanti and John Moore, he posed much the same question King Theodahad had uttered 1400 years earlier: Could they re-create the Forum as it was at the height of its grandeur?

When they said they thought it could be done Bronston made one of the most dramatic decisions in film history – he authorized them to construct on the plains of Las Matas, 16 miles from the Bronston Studios in Madrid, the Forum, as no living person had seen it since before Alaric's swept over Rome 15 centuries ago. He made clear that it was not to be merely another gigantic film set but a full scale reproduction that Commodus himself would recognize were he suddenly to come to life.

Colasanti and Moore were working on the Legation City for "55 Days at Peking," generally considered as the largest of all motion picture sets. Now they had an assignment that was even bigger and in two years of intensive research they made 3000 sketches for the 27 structures that were the main features of the Forum. Construction began October 1, 1962 and as many as 1100 men worked daily for seven months to raise Ancient Rome in what had once been barley fields on the road to the historic home of the Spanish kings, El Escorial.

The buildings were three-dimensional with skeletons of tubular steel set into concrete bases. This took so much steel – 320 miles of it – that the set used up all the available supply in Spain and Bronston sent back immense shipments obtained from construction sites in France and Italy at premium prices. The most challenging structure was the mighty Temple of Jupiter which in the Forum Romanum towered above the square from a site on one of the hills of Rome.

Colasanti and Moore, in consultation with engineering experts, devised a man-made hill 95 feet high on which they built a temple 165 feet high. Thus the bronze equestrian figures on its peak were 260 feet

above the stone-paved surface of the Forum itself, a considerable feat of architecture and engineering.

Every sculptor and skilled plaster worker in the Madrid area was invited to work on the adornment of the set, along with art students from all over Spain – a staff of about 400 gifted craftsmen. They moulded, in special studios and plaster shops adjoining the set, some 350 individual statues, some of them reproductions of actual Roman statues unearthed over the years, some replicas of Greek statues which Roman sculptors copied from Grecian temples.

The statues ranged from the 76 slightly larger than life-size adorning the Basilicas Julia and Aemilia to equestrian groups 25 feet high. More than a thousand sculptured panels were made for the bases of some of the statues and the eight Victory Columns, as well as half a mile of decorative plaster moulding for the facades of the various buildings.

Interior scenes required sumptuous settings at Bronston Studios in Madrid and at Cinecitta Studios in Rome where the palace baths and gymnasiums, or Palaestra, decorated with mosaics on the theme of gladiators and their games, took five months to build. Other noteworthy sets include the temple of Jupiter, dominated by a 60-foot high statue of the Roman god, the brick-walled Senate, the Temple of Julia with its gilded statues, the Tabularium or Hall of Records and Lucilla's beautiful quarters in the Imperial Palace.

The statistics are numbing – 170,000 large cement blocks for the pavement of the Forum, 610 columns for the buildings, 22,000 feet of concrete steps and stairways, 24,000 pounds of nails, 33,000 gallons of paint, 230,000 roofing tiles.

So much went into the re-creation – so much thought, devotion, and integrity – that when the last scene was shot and the last actor had left, Bronston was reluctant to order it demolished. It stands there, a Ninth Wonder of the Cinematic World, a place of pilgrimage not only for film people but for princes and commoners alike and for tourists abruptly braking their cars to blink in awe at the Rome of Commodus shimmering in the sun of the Spain of today.

3. An Epilogue

The catastrophe of Commodus' reign must symbolize, by dramatic privilege, a long process of internal decay and barbarian inundation that finally gave Rome to the barbarians in the year 476. In the East the Roman Empire survived till 1453, but meanwhile it lost nearly all its

Roman qualities. In the West the pagan Empire was gradually replaced, as the source of social order, by the Christian Church. The reins and skills of government were transmitted to the papacy and the bishops; the lost power of the broken sword was recovered by the magic of the consoling word; the provinces and the barbarians, accepting Christianity, acknowledged again the sovereignty of Rome; the captured capital captured her conquerors.

Through the long struggles of the Age of Faith the authority of Rome grew, until in the Renaissance the ancient Greco-Roman culture seemed to rise from the grave, and the beautiful city became once more the center and summit of the world's life and wealth and art. When, in 1964, Rome celebrated the 2717th anniversary of her foundation, she could look back upon the most impressive continuity of government and civilization in the history of mankind. *Ave, Roma immortalis!* – Hail, immortal Rome!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Edward Gibbon and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Martin M. Winkler

By the time the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* appeared in 1776, Edward Gibbon's home country had become a powerful empire itself. To Gibbon, the history of Rome was of universal significance and possessed symbolic value; it was something momentous, applicable to other societies at other times.¹ Gibbon wrote in the opening paragraph of Chapter I that the fall of Rome was "a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth."² *Historia magistra vitae*: to Gibbon and countless others before or since, history is the teacher of life.³

¹ Cf. John Robertson, "Gibbon's Roman Empire as a Universal Monarchy: The *Decline and Fall* and the Imperial Idea in Early Modern Europe," in Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 247–270.

² Here and below, references to and quotations from Gibbon are by abbreviated title (*HDF*) and by volume and page of Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (Everyman's Library; New York: Knopf, 1993). The present quotation is at *HDF* 1, 3. This modern-spelling edition reprints the text of the seven-volume edition by J. B. Bury of 1896–1900; cf. *HDF* 1, xcvi.

³ The Latin saying is from Cicero, *On the Orator* 2.9.36. Whether they state it explicitly or not, ancient historians regularly emphasize the moral and didactic purpose of their work; famous examples are Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.4, and Livy, *From the Foundation of the City*, pref. 1–5. On Gibbon cf. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of*

Gibbon's influence on intellectual history has been extensive. The best proof is the fact that "the fall of the Roman Empire" has become a standard expression. This idea took hold of the popular imagination only with Gibbon.⁴ As a modern historian has put it: "it is Gibbon . . . who dominates discussion of the subject today . . . our modern obsession with the fall of Rome not only began in the eighteenth century but also, as most of us have known it, bore the Gibbonian stamp."⁵

Still, the concept of the decline of Rome has a long history. In 1734, Montesquieu famously expressed it in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, a work which Gibbon knew.⁶ The idea is also an integral part of ancient theorizing about the cyclical

History (rev. ed.; New York: Norton, 1999; rpt. 2000), 13: "In the greatest of the Enlightenment histories . . . , Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the actors are moral qualities rather than human beings, and the ultimate lesson is that superstition, fanaticism, and religious belief, all of which were . . . anathema to Enlightenment rationalists, were dangerous forces that had brought down one great and benign empire and could well wreak further havoc in the future if they were not eradicated."

⁴ Argued convincingly by Arnaldo Momigliano, "La caduta senza rumore di un impero nel 476 d. C.," in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, ser. 3, vol. 3, fasc. 2 (1973), 397–418; also in Vittore Branca (ed.), *Concetto, storia, miti e immagini del Medio Evo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), 409–428; rpt. in Arnaldo Momigliano, *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1980), 159–179. Cf. Glen W. Bowersock, "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49 no. 8 (May, 1996), 29–43. Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (Munich: Beck, 1984), is the most exhaustive study of the impact of the fall of Rome on Western intellectual history. Cf. also Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). By contrast, the influential work of Peter Brown has demonstrated the continuity of Rome beyond the end of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476; see in particular Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150–750* (1971; rpt. New York: Norton, 1989) and *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998). Cf. further Hans Drexler, "Aufstieg und Niedergang Roms in Wechselwirkung mit dem römischen Staatsdenken," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 1.2 (1972), 794–826.

⁵ Bowersock, "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome," 30 and 36–37.

⁶ The best modern English edition of *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* is Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, tr. David Lowenthal (1965; rpt., with corrections, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999). Cf. Robert Shackleton, "The Impact of French Literature on Gibbon," in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive, and Stephen R. Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 207–218. C. N. Cochrane, "The Mind of Edward Gibbon," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 12 (1942–1943), 1–17 and 146–166, calls Montesquieu's work "an anticipation, almost indeed a *précis*, of Gibbon's" (9). J. J. Saunders, "Gibbon in Rome 1764," *History Today*, 14 (1964), 608–615, calls Gibbon "the disciple of Bayle, Montesquieu and Hume" (614).

nature of history and the fate of states.⁷ A specific example is Polybius' report about Scipio the Younger's emotional reaction to the fall of Carthage in 146 BC.⁸ The idea was revived in Renaissance historiography, especially by Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo.⁹ But before Gibbon chief emphasis had been on the *translatio imperii*, the continuation of Roman history and culture from pagan to Christian Rome, from the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire, and from the *pax Romana* to the *pax Christiana*. Roman history and culture changed and developed, even declined, but it did not fall into oblivion. Gibbon initiated a new phase in the retrospective contemplation and moralizing interpretation of the Roman Empire.

In the course of time, however, Gibbon became an author venerated and beloved only among the well-educated upper and upper-middle classes, who were trained in the classical cultures and languages and lived among neoclassical architecture and decorative arts. But where today is Gibbon's name mentioned except among professional historians or scholars of intellectual history? Modern students, for example, tend to balk at or protest against assignments requiring reading even parts of his first volume. They also complain that they cannot understand his language. Did Gibbon himself undergo a decline and fall in influence and popularity? Are now only the dreaming spires of academe or the ivory tower Gibbon's residence?

The worldwide success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) might tell us differently. The plot of this film begins in AD 180, the last year of the rule

⁷ Cf. especially Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Rise and Fall of States According to Greek Authors* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), with further references.

⁸ Polybius, *Histories* 38.19–22, as preserved by Plutarch and Appian. On Polybius as moral historian cf. Arthur M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). See also Michel Baridon, *Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome: Histoire et idéologie au siècle des lumières* (Paris: Editions Honoré Champion, 1977), 376–385, 392–402, and 596–626, on Whig intellectualism and its connections to Polybius.

⁹ Cf. the overview by Peter Burke, "Tradition and Experience: The Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon," in Bowersock, Clive, and Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 87–102. J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3: *The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), is the most extensive study of Chapters I–XIV of Gibbon's first volume and presents "a survey of the idea of Decline and Fall itself" (2). Chapters 8 and 9 of this book (Pocock, 153–202) deal with Bruni and Biondo, part of Chapter 15 with Montesquieu (Pocock, 338–360), with quotations from the relevant passages of their works. On Bruni's rediscovery of Polybius cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe," in F. W. Walbank (ed.), *Polybe* (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1974), 347–372; rpt. in Momigliano, *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, 103–123.

of Marcus Aurelius, and shows the ascension and tyrannical rule of his son Commodus. A fictional hero, suitably named Maximus (“Greatest”), removes Commodus from power and puts Rome back on the right political track. But not many filmgoers are aware that *Gladiator* is an unofficial remake of Anthony Mann’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose title points us directly back to Gibbon. Its qualities chiefly derive from Mann’s affinity for historical and epic filmmaking and from Gibbon, its spiritual progenitor.

The Fall of the Roman Empire is a labor of love, made with obvious dedication. It intends to make evident to general viewers the greatness of Rome, as Gibbon had done for his readers. Several scenes demonstrate the film’s closeness to Gibbon. A short essay that Mann wrote at the time of its release – “Empire Demolition,” included in the present book – shows that he was aware that no film can be made from Gibbon’s work. But Gibbon was the reason and starting point for this film, despite the simplifications and distortions that are unavoidable in any retelling of history.¹⁰ Mann wrote: “This is not a film based on Gibbon. No film could digest his *Decline and Fall* . . . but the inspiration was the Oxford concise edition of some fifteen hundred pages.” Mann mentions other ancient and modern authors whom he read and continues:

I came across one very exciting thing about the period, which made our storyline possible. All the historians spoke of the creativity of Rome. It was one of the great adventures of all history – Rome gave us greater law, greater understanding, greater concepts of peoples. All the historians picked the time of Marcus Aurelius as the beginning of the end.

The most influential of such historians was Gibbon. After naming the five good emperors who ruled from AD 96–180 – Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius – he identified the starting point of his account in its opening paragraph: “It is the design of this, and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire; and afterwards, from the death of Marcus Antoninus [i.e. Marcus Aurelius], to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall” (*HDF* 1, 3).¹¹

¹⁰ Jesús García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston* (Madrid: Ediciones del Imán, 2000), includes among his (unpaginated) illustrations a publicity photograph showing Mann bent over a model of the set of the Roman Forum while holding a volume of Gibbon in his hand.

¹¹ This is despite Gibbon’s later doubts about his choice of where to begin; see Patricia B. Craddock (ed.), *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 338 (part of Gibbon’s marginalia to *HDF*).

Mann and his screenwriters followed Gibbon's example. They began with Marcus Aurelius' military campaign on the German frontier. Mann opened his three-hour epic with a stately panning shot of a wintry landscape surrounding a huge border fortress, which the camera slowly approaches. An omniscient narrator introduces us to time and place and to the importance of the story we are about to see:

Two of the greatest problems in history are how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall. We may come nearer to understanding the truth if we remember that the fall of Rome, like her rise, had not one cause but many and was not an event but a process spread over three hundred years. Some nations have not lasted as long as Rome fell.

In the year 180 A.D. the emperor Marcus Aurelius was leading his Roman legions against Germanic tribes along the Danube frontier.

Mann could hardly have done better than to involve us in his film with such an elegiac opening. The film's first half takes place on this border. It culminates in the death of Marcus Aurelius and the assumption of power by Commodus. Only then does Mann introduce us to the city of Rome, the heart of the empire. By this time we have witnessed the great task that Marcus had set for himself: to defend and preserve the empire's borders and the civilization it represents. Without showing us even a glimpse of Rome itself, Mann conveys to us the value of Roman culture and the greatness of Rome at this turning point in its history. With such an approach Mann reminds us of the views the ancients themselves had of Antonine Rome. Ancient historians had only the highest praise for the five good emperors, especially Marcus Aurelius. The era of their rule represented a new golden age for Rome and a flowering of arts and sciences. Cassius Dio, a Roman senator and eyewitness to the times of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, memorably observed that upon the death of Marcus "our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust."¹² Gibbon himself refers to this turning point in his opening paragraph. In a section of Chapter III entitled "Happiness of the Romans" he praises the age of the Antonines in the most ringing tones:

¹² Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 72.36. The translation is from *Dio's Roman History*, tr. Earnest Cary, vol. 9 (Loeb Classical Library, 177; Cambridge: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1927; rpt. 1969), 69. On Antonine Rome cf., e.g., A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, vol. 1 (1964; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3–16, and Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1987; rpt. 2000), 11–27 and 268–269 (references).

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.

Shortly before, Gibbon characterized Marcus Aurelius in equally unforgettable terms, saying, for example, that “his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of [the Stoic philosopher] Zeno . . . His memory was revered by a grateful posterity.”¹³ Marcus came close to the Platonic ideal of a philosopher-king.¹⁴

So Mann started his film with Marcus Aurelius. He wrote: “the Golden Age of Rome was the hundred years [more accurately, eighty-four years] when there was no war, the only time in the history of the world when this was so. We picked this climactic moment to open our film.” He also explains how he approached his subject:

In *Fall of the Roman Empire* I have concentrated in the first part on establishing the characters in simple, human terms . . . Then the spectacle is done entirely differently to what you would expect, because the whole of the Empire comes to Marcus Aurelius in the mountains with all their different coloured chariots, their different religions and so on; and he makes a speech to them, and the speech is what the empire was – so that in very simple terms we show the empire and its vastness through the eyes of one man.¹⁵

¹³ *HDF* 1, 89–90. Tributes to the greatness of Marcus Aurelius, chiefly in regard to his Stoic philosophy that guided his reign and life, are numerous. Examples are given in Chapter One.

¹⁴ The ancient biographer of Marcus Aurelius even goes so far as to observe that he was greater than Plato (*Augustan History*: “Marcus Antoninus” 19.12). Cf. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. Michael Levey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 192, where Pater refers to Book IX of Plato’s *Republic* as a source of Marcus’ *Meditations*. Pater’s novel first appeared in 1885; Pater revised it considerably for the third edition of 1892, its now canonical text.

¹⁵ Both quotations are from Mann, “Empire Demolition.” His implied observation that meaningful historical epics should differ from common spectacle films had been made explicit decades earlier by one of Hollywood’s best-known epic filmmakers. In an article published in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in September, 1927, and called “The Public Is Always Right,” Cecil B. DeMille wrote: “Spectacle, for spectacle’s sake, is not only not worth what it costs, but it can be a positive detriment if it is not hooked up with human action.” Quoted from the reprint in Richard Koszarski (ed.), *Hollywood Directors, 1914–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 161–170; quotation at 165.

The sequence in which this speech occurs is the first epic set piece in the film. It is best understood if we consider it in conjunction with the words of a twentieth-century historian who wrote in the tradition of Gibbon. In *The Nemesis of Empire* Edward Togo Salmon described the second century AD in terms that not only echo Gibbon but also fit Marcus Aurelius' speech in Mann's film. What the modern historian and the cinematic Roman have to say is surprisingly similar. First, Salmon, from the beginning of his second chapter, called " 'Land of Hope and Glory' ":

The Roman Empire enjoyed its heyday in the first two centuries A.D., during which period it reconciled its inhabitants to the idea of Roman rule and achieved a considerable degree of unity. It owed this success chiefly to its remarkable absorptive powers.

The Empire consisted of all sorts and conditions of men speaking a wide variety of tongues, professing all kinds of religious beliefs, different from one another in their ways of life and the cultural levels that they had attained, the Romans themselves being the ruling people. But the Romans were not an exclusive sect, intent on keeping all the lesser breeds beyond the pale.

The Pax Romana . . . made the Roman Empire very attractive for those who lived within its borders. It came to be regarded as the region of ordered and civilized living, the *oikumene* to use the Greek word commonly adopted to describe it . . . The world beyond was the barbarous region, where lawlessness and anarchy were rife. Inside the *oikumene* the rule of law prevailed.¹⁶

Now Marcus Aurelius' speech in the film. I quote only the relevant passage:

You have come from the deserts of Egypt, from the mountains of Armenia, from the forests of Gaul and the prairies of Spain. You do not resemble each other nor wear the same clothes nor sing the same songs nor worship the same gods. Yet, like a mighty tree with green leaves and black roots, you are the unity which is Rome. Look about you and look at yourselves, and see the greatness of Rome. Two hundred years ago, the Gauls were our fiercest enemies; now we greet them as friends. In the whole world only two small frontiers are still hostile to us: one here in the north, which separates us from those who are called barbarians; the other in the east: Persia. Only on these two borders will you find walls, palisades, forts, and hatred. But these are not the frontiers Rome wants. Rome wants and needs human frontiers. We've had to fight long wars. Your burdens have been

¹⁶ E. T. Salmon, *The Nemesis of Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); quotations at 29 and 33; cf. 45.

great. But we come now to the end of the road. Here, within our reach, golden centuries of peace – a true *pax Romana*. Wherever you live, whatever the color of your skin, when peace is achieved, it will bring to all, *all*, the supreme rights of Roman citizenship. No longer provinces or colonies, but Rome, Rome everywhere: a family of equal nations. That is what lies ahead.

The speech is remarkable for several reasons. Cinemagoers of the early 1960s who remembered Hollywood’s Roman epics from Mervyn LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis* (1951) to William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* (1959) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960) may have been surprised that the Romans are not presented as ruthless militarists and conquerors, as inhumane imperialists and slave-owners, or as irreligious degenerates obsessed with games and orgies – the standard view of them in American films.¹⁷ Instead viewers are invited to identify with the Romans as bringers of peace and civilization, a goal announced by a philosopher and ruler capable of resisting the temptations of absolute power. And he is being played by a popular actor, Alec Guinness, who was famous for his “good guy” persona and for a distinguished career on stage and screen: “above all the performance of Guinness as Marcus Aurelius, especially in the parade of kings [and leaders], shows us the dedication and civilizing power of that empire.”¹⁸ With Marcus’ speech Mann expresses the perspective implied by the narrator’s introduction: Rome was an advanced culture from which much of later Western civilization derives and whose political fall represented a serious setback in mankind’s progress toward peace and stability. Mann and his screenwriters signal early on that their film is something different from standard cinematic fare about Romans.

Marcus Aurelius’ speech captures the essence of Gibbon’s description of the Roman colonies and the emperors’ attitude toward the barbarians. Marcus’ term “human frontiers” and his mention of Roman citizenship echo what Gibbon says about the Roman colonies in Chapter II:

they were soon endeared to the natives by the ties of friendship and alliance, they effectually diffused a reverence for the Roman name, and a desire, which was seldom disappointed, of sharing, in due time, its honours and advantages . . . in the age of the Antonines, when the freedom of the

¹⁷ On this see especially my “The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945,” in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 50–76.

¹⁸ J. H. Fenwick and Jonathan Green-Armytage, “Now You See It: Landscape and Anthony Mann,” *Sight and Sound*, 34 no. 4 (1965), 186–189, at 189.

city had been bestowed on the greater number of their subjects, it was . . . accompanied with very solid advantages. The bulk of the people acquired, with that title, the benefit of the Roman laws. (*HDF* 1, 42–43)

In Chapter I Gibbon writes about Hadrian and his two successors:

They persisted in the design of maintaining the dignity of the empire, without attempting to enlarge its limits. By every honourable expedient they invited the friendship of the barbarians; and endeavoured to convince mankind that the Roman power, raised above the temptation of conquest, was actuated only by the love of order and justice. During a long period of forty-three years their virtuous labours were crowned with success; and if we except a few slight hostilities that served to exercise the legions of the frontier, the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius offer the fair prospect of universal peace. (*HDF* 1, 11–12)

Even Marcus Aurelius' reference to the Gauls could have come straight out of Gibbon, who mentions them in Chapter II as an example of people who acquired the advantages of Roman citizenship: "The grandsons of the Gauls, who had besieged Julius Caesar in Alesia, commanded legions, governed provinces, and were admitted into the senate of Rome. Their ambition, instead of disturbing the tranquillity of the state, was intimately connected with its safety and greatness" (*HDF* 1, 43).

Gibbon's observation about Roman friendship with the barbarians finds an analogy early in Mann's film. Marcus replies to the offer of his general Livius, the film's fictional hero, to bring him the head of Ballomar, the Germanic chieftain: "No, Livius; please don't bring me his head. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Bring him to me alive . . . I wish to speak with him . . . Rome has existed for a thousand years. It is time we found peaceful ways to live with those you call barbarians."¹⁹ This, like Marcus' oration, is virtually a distillation of Gibbon's second chapter. Its title is "Of the Union and internal Prosperity of the Roman Empire, in the Age of the Antonines," and it contains sections on the "Universal Spirit

¹⁹ Ballomar (Latinized: Ballomarius) was king of the Marcomanni and instrumental in the peace accord of AD 167 between the Germanic tribes and Rome. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 149, 169, and 282 n. 24 (references). Gibbon, who does not mention Ballomarius, deals with the history of the German tribes in Chapter IX. On this and Gibbon's preceding chapter (concerning Persia) see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4: *Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; rpt. 2008). The attitude of the film's Marcus to Ballomar resembles that of the historical emperor to the Roman conspirator and rebel Avidius Cassius as expressed after the latter's suicide. As Gibbon puts it, Cassius had disappointed Marcus "of the pleasure of converting an enemy into a friend" (*HDF* 1, 90).

of Toleration” and “Obedience and Union.”²⁰ The film’s long sequence on the frontier shows us an emperor who closely resembles the historical Marcus. As Gibbon put it: “War he detested, as the disgrace and calamity of human nature; but when the necessity of a just defence called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the weakness of his constitution” (*HDF* 1, 90).

Nevertheless, an assembly of the kind Mann shows in his film is a historical impossibility for obvious practical and political reasons. We may, however, compare the annual assemblies at Arles in Gaul, another Roman border area, which were instituted under Emperor Honorius after the split of the empire at the end of the fourth century. At the close of Chapter XXXI Gibbon provides us with a detailed and vivid description (*HDF* 3, 327–328). Some of it may have found its way into Mann’s scene, although evidence is unavailable. The scene demonstrates Mann’s approach to recreating Roman history on the screen. In his own words:

all we were trying to do was dramatize how an empire fell . . . I didn’t want to make the history so close [to facts] that it would impair the film . . . if . . . everything is historical, then you don’t have [dramatic] liberty.²¹

In “Empire Demolition” Mann further observed:

inaccuracies from an historical point of view . . . are not important. The most important thing is that you get the feeling of history. The actual facts, very few people know . . . But you cannot change the actual event.

Despite the last statement, a number of events are changed in the film, most significantly the death of Commodus. Gibbon, most scrupulous of historians, would part company with Mann over the importance of facts. But although historical cinema is by nature different from historiography, there are affinities.²² It is evident to every reader that the greatness

²⁰ *HDF* 1, 33–68 (Chapter II): “Universal Spirit of Toleration” (34–39), “Obedience and Union” (50–51).

²¹ Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” *Screen*, 10 no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 53.

²² On this see my more detailed examination in Chapter Nine. But here is a recent example. An academic historian ends the preface (“A Note to the Reader”) to a book on the American Civil War by observing: “In telling the story of this crucial moment, and in aiming to make it vivid and resonant . . . I have tried to present events from the inside, as

of Gibbon derives from the combination and balance of historical accuracy and literary imagination in his mind and in his work. Gibbon had to be and indeed was “the most erudite man of feeling that ever lived” although “the judicious balance of erudition and feeling he has achieved” in his first four volumes begins to slip when Gibbon “can no longer rely so confidently on the reassurance of fact . . . both because the historical materials are insufficient and because the reader’s patience, along with Gibbon’s own, could hardly stand up to the task” of going through the entire history of Byzantium until AD 1453.²³

Mann was not a historian, but he was fascinated by history. Many of his films are set in the past. If historians cannot fully rely on the historical record, an imaginative storyteller is even more limited and must resort to inferences. Mann was interested primarily in that aspect of history he could succeed with: its emotional appeal. So he did not hesitate to turn to that area of history that is, strictly speaking, unhistorical: myths and legends about the past and its famous characters. In his own words:

legend makes the very best cinema. It excites the imagination more . . . legend is a concept of characters greater than life . . . *Roman Empire* is even more than that . . . It wasn’t completely a legend though it has a legendary quality.²⁴

Mann’s film conveys a feeling for history better than all other films set in ancient Rome, just as Gibbon was a master of conveying a feeling of Roman history on every page. Mann unconsciously echoes Gibbon’s opening remarks about the importance of Roman history when he explains in “Empire Demolition” why he was interested in this subject:

The reason for making *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is that it is as modern today as it was in the history that Gibbon wrote: if you read Gibbon . . . it is like seeing the future as well as the past. The future is the thing that

they appeared to the participants. . . . I hope that it has the feeling of history unfolding, not of history considered in retrospect.” Quoted from Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2006; rpt. 2007), xi.

²³ W. B. Carnochan, “Gibbon’s Feelings,” in David Womersley (ed.), *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 333–346; quotations at 342–343 and 341. Cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Gibbon’s Historical Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford Humanities Center, 1988), 10–11, with quotation from Gibbon’s introductory comments to Chapter X (*HDF* 1, 263–264). Bowersock’s lecture first appeared in a shorter version under the same title in *The American Scholar*, 57 (Winter, 1988), 33–47. On the importance of imagination for historical research cf. G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 108–113.

²⁴ Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 42–43.

interested me in the subject. The past is like a mirror; it reflects what actually happened, and in the reflexion of the fall of Rome are the same elements in what is happening today, the very things that are making our empires fall.²⁵

The last few words may be too great a claim for the 1960s, but by the time of the American wars in the early twenty-first century they have acquired an uncanny new resonance. Analogies of the Roman and the American empires have become a regular part of today's political discourse.²⁶ A particular sequence that Mann placed almost exactly in the middle of his film demonstrates what he meant. After Marcus' death an irresponsible Commodus has come to power.²⁷ A debate in the Roman senate about barbarians, slaves, and Roman citizenship now contrasts two views of Rome and its empire. This episode appears as a summation of modern debates about the meaning of Rome in today's culture. First a senator who functions as Commodus' mouthpiece addresses the assembled Fathers. He begins:

Have you heard what is being proposed? Caius Metellus Livius has asked that we, the Roman senate, should give these barbarians, these savages, Roman citizenship and settle them on Roman land. To treat these wander-

²⁵ Mann's view of Gibbon is exemplified by Peter P. Witonski (ed.), *Gibbon for Moderns: The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire with Lessons for America Today* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1974), a selection from *HDF* with the editor's commentary.

²⁶ Representative recent studies of this phenomenon are Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). The first chapter of James's book is entitled "The Model of Decline and Fall" (the first person mentioned by name on its opening page is Gibbon), the last "The Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Empire." James begins as follows, echoing Mann: "Our predecessors have thought about problems similar to those of the modern globalizing world, and they in turn believed that they could understand their environment by thinking about their own predecessors. Faced with an economic dynamism, that was both driven and divided by the assertion of political power, they saw the Roman Empire as a model for the dilemmas of future ages." Americans are generally wary of calling their country an empire, but their status as the only superpower now existing tells us differently. Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004; rpt. New York: Penguin, 2005), *passim*, speaks of an "empire in denial." Several books published since 2001 on contemporary American politics and history have the phrase "imperial presidency" in their title. Cf. in general Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973; new ed., 2004). See further my discussion in Chapter One, with additional references.

²⁷ Olivier Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 2002), is the most recent study of this emperor's life and reign.

ing murderers as brothers, equals . . . If we make Romans of these barbarians, can we withhold Roman citizenship from [others]? Then what becomes of the precious prize Roman citizenship once was? It becomes a cheap, common thing, to be given away like bread. I say no! We are Romans, warriors. Let us rid our minds of this poisonous idea. Crucify their leaders. Sell the rest as slaves. Teach them once and for all what it is to make war on Rome. *That* is the Roman way!

This is the common modern view of the Roman Empire as an oppressive military colossus ready to crush the slightest resistance under its heel – the kind of empire that had been overthrown for the good of mankind. The senator’s references to cheap bread reinforces the point: it reminds us of the Roman satirist Juvenal’s famous expression *panem et circenses* (“bread and games”).²⁸ Ironically, the senator’s view of citizenship is not entirely unjustified. Gibbon himself had summarized the impact of universal citizenship on the fate of Rome: “The nation of soldiers, magistrates, and legislators . . . was dissolved into the common mass of mankind and confounded with the millions of servile provincials, who had received the name without adopting the spirit of Romans” (*HDF* 1, 215).²⁹ Emperor Caracalla, whose edict, the *constitutio Antoniniana*, conferred Roman citizenship on all free-born adults living within the borders of the empire in AD 212/213, was to Gibbon a villain who greatly contributed to the hastening of the empire’s irreversible decline.³⁰

Although it partly conforms to Gibbon, the senator’s view cannot be what we are to consider the right one. Instead the film extols the virtues of universal citizenship in a way that mirrors the modern United States, the melting pot of diverse nations as symbolized in the Statue of Liberty and foreshadowed in Mann’s film by Marcus’ oration. So a counter-argument follows the senator’s speech. Livius introduces Timonides, a

²⁸ Juvenal, *Satires* 10.82. Juvenal (c. AD 60–140) published his sixteen satires under Trajan and Hadrian.

²⁹ Cf., e.g., the modern verdict by Salmon, *The Nemesis of Empire*, 82: “A more potent factor [than even treason or disloyalty] had been the growing carelessness with which the citizenship was extended. The once invigorating and generous policy of admitting new elements from the provinces into the ranks of the Romans got out of hand and brought about a transformation of the citizen body. The imprudent prodigality with which the citizenship was bestowed proved to be the nemesis of empire.” On the impact of citizenship on the Roman army cf. Salmon, “The Roman Army and the Disintegration of the Roman Empire,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd ser., sect. II, 52 (1958), 43–57; rpt. in Mortimer Chambers (ed.), *The Fall of Rome: Can It Be Explained?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 37–46. Cf. MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*, 171–177.

³⁰ Cf. *HDF* 1, 143–154 and 184–186 (on the edict).

fictional Greek philosopher who had become a Roman and had been Marcus Aurelius' advisor. Timonides urges a strategy opposite to that of Commodus' sycophant. He pleads for a new Roman way, one in accord with Marcus Aurelius' vision:

A hundred times we have taught those we call barbarians what it means to make war on Rome. We've burned their villages, we've crucified their leaders, we have enslaved their young. The fires go out, the dead are buried, the slaves die – slowly; but the *hatred* that we leave behind us never dies. Hatred means wars. Wars mean tribute torn from our provinces, taxes, hunger, disease. How costly that is, how wasteful! And yet the answer is simple. We must have no war. . . . Let us transform [the barbarians] from men of war to men of peace . . . Let us do what is profitable and right. Let us share the greatest gift of all: let us give these men the right of Roman freedom. Then they will spread the word that Rome has accepted them as equals. Then will we have our human frontiers, the Roman peace that Marcus Aurelius promised.

This speech agrees with historical fact and restates Gibbon's view of the political and social aspirations of Antonine Rome.³¹ But it immediately meets with resistance from Commodus' side. The same senator now rises again and in good demagogic fashion attempts to play on the senate's empty pride in the façade of power and on the prejudices and fears of all who cannot see the new Rome:

Caesar has asked me: "When has Rome ever been greater or stronger?" I say in answer to Caesar: "Never has Rome been greater or stronger than *now*." And what is it that has kept our empire together? Our *strength!* Our *might!* Equality, freedom, peace – who is it that uses these words but Greeks and Jews and slaves? Behind him [Ballomar] and his people are the Vandals, untold millions of them waiting for a moment of weakness, ready to destroy us. If we take these barbarians in amongst us, our enemies will say it is because we are weak, and they will pour in on us from everywhere. It will be the end of the Roman Empire. It will be the end – of Rome.

Some of this may be historically simple or anachronistic, but the extent to which Gibbon's themes are given voice, including that of the threat posed to the empire by the barbarians waiting at the gates, is unusual for a work of popular culture in a medium that has to reach the largest possible audience. After listening to Marcus Aurelius and emotionally reacting to his fate, viewers are no longer in sympathy with such an

³¹ Cf. Salmon, *The Nemesis of Empire*, 48–49.

opinion about empire. The senator's casually derogatory reference to Jews and slaves exposes him as a racist and supremacist, an unhistorical but clever moment for the filmmakers to ensure that all viewers are against such inhumanity. They are firmly on the side of Livius, Timonides, and the late emperor.

The turning point in the debate arrives when an old senator addresses the assembly. He is the embodiment of Rome's traditional virtues and speaks with the voice of experience but not of fossilized conservatism. Instead he looks ahead. His speech makes clear that Marcus' vision must come true if Rome is to survive:

The end of Rome? How does an empire die? Does it collapse in one terrible moment? No, no, but there comes a time when its people no longer believe in it. Then, then does an empire begin to die. Fathers of Rome, I have lived under four great emperors: Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus [Pius], Marcus Aurelius. And during all those years our empire grew, changed. The law of life is: grow or die. And you, the senators, are the heart of Rome. It is through you that the people speak. Speak up! Let the world hear you! Let the world know that Rome will not die. There are millions . . . waiting at our gates. If we do not open these gates, they will break them down and destroy us. But instead, let us grow ever bigger, ever greater; let us take them among us . . . Honorable Fathers, we have changed the world – can we not change ourselves?

This appeal wins over the senate. But as we know from history and from the film's title and prologue, the noble aspirations of Marcus will be realized neither under Commodus nor at any other time in the future. The senate debate, "one of the most thoughtful sequences ever placed on 70 mm [film]," expresses the spirit of Gibbon to an extent surprising in a work of popular art. The old senator's speech is the culmination point at "the core of the film."³² Even his rhetorical image of the senate as the heart of the body politic is historically justified, if probably not intentionally so. To Romans the heart was not only the seat of emotions but also of intellect and reason.³³ And "in mediaeval allegory the councilors are often referred to as the *heart*" of the state, whose ruler is its head.³⁴

³² Both quotations are from Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 108.

³³ The latter meaning of *cor* ("heart") goes back to Roman literature of the republic, especially Plautus, Lucretius, and Cicero.

³⁴ The quotation is from Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet* (Arden Shakespeare; 1982; rpt. London: Thomson, 2003), 181–182, in note on *Hamlet* 1.2.47. An instance in Roman context occurs at *Coriolanus* 1.1.113–114.

That the old senator's speech comes close to the heart of history – a people's disenchantment with their government as major factor in the decline of Rome and perhaps of all empires – becomes evident if we compare what a modern historian wrote thirty years after the film's release (and presumably with the recent fall of an ostensibly imperishable modern empire in mind). Although his language is more analytical than what we hear in the film, Michael Grant seems to echo the old senator's observation that an empire begins to die when its people no longer believe in it. After summarizing foreign invasions and immigration as external factors of their political decline, Grant writes about the Romans:

The western Roman empire became subject to a sort of internal paralysis, which prevented the inhabitants from averting its downfall. In the end, they felt that their government did nothing for them, and so they did nothing to help it.³⁵

The film's old senator even resembles the historical senator Pertinax as Gibbon describes him.³⁶ Before he became emperor after the assassination of Commodus, Pertinax had been

an ancient senator of consular rank, whose conspicuous merit had broke [*sic*] through the obscurity of his birth, and raised him to the first honours of the state. He had successfully governed most of the provinces of the empire; and in all his great employments, military as well as civil, he had uniformly distinguished himself by the firmness, the prudence, and the integrity of his conduct. He now remained almost alone of the friends and ministers of Marcus [Aurelius]. (*HDF* 1, 109–110)

With expressions like “the law of nature” and “grow or die” the old senator echoes Marcus' image of the Roman Empire as a tree.³⁷ This metaphor is in keeping with Gibbon's view of Rome, despite some obvious differences. In a retrospective section following Chapter XXXVIII, called “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West,” Gibbon writes:

The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was

³⁵ Michael Grant, *The Antonines: The Roman Empire in Transition* (London: Routledge, 1994; rpt. 1996), 160–161.

³⁶ Cf. also my comments on him in Chapter One.

³⁷ Cf. Martin M. Winkler, “*Star Wars* and the Roman Empire,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 272–290, at 287.

the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.³⁸

Christopher Dawson has provided an apt comment on Gibbon's image of decay:

All earthly things are subject to mutability. Growth and decay, life and death, are the law of states as well as of individuals . . . this conception only needs to be interpreted in a vitalistic sense in order to become an organic theory of social development. And though such theories are often regarded as characteristically modern, they were by no means unknown in Gibbon's day . . . In reality, the Roman empire fell not by war or political incapacity but because of a process of sociological decay which destroyed the foundations of its strength.³⁹

³⁸ *HDF* 4, 119. It does not seem generally known that Gibbon's statement that "the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight" is a close echo of the Roman poet Lucan, who commented in his epic *Pharsalia*, written during the time of Nero, on the fall of the Roman Republic: *summisque negatum / stare diu nimioque graves sub pondere lapsus / nec se Roma ferens* ("it is denied to the highest [people or things] to remain standing for long, and under their excessive weight they come down in heavy fall; nor could Rome sustain itself"; *Pharsalia* 1.70–72). A pithy summary comes shortly after: *in se magna ruunt* ("great things collapse upon themselves"; *Pharsalia* 1.81).

³⁹ Christopher Dawson, "Edward Gibbon and the Fall of Rome," in Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 326–353; quotation at 349–350. This chapter combines Dawson's 1934 lecture "Edward Gibbon," published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 20 (1935), and as a separate pamphlet, and Dawson's preface to the Everyman edition of *HDF* (London: Dent / New York: Dutton, 1953). Dawson, 350, notes that Gibbon did not himself apply "these organic conceptions," but cf. Patricia B. Craddock, "Edward Gibbon and the 'Ruins of the Capitol,'" in Annabel Patterson (ed.), *Roman Images* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 63–82, at 79: "As a narrative artist, Gibbon knew what as philosophic historian he never articulated: all change, including growth, implies death." Cf. also Andrew Lossky, "Introduction: Gibbon and the Enlightenment," in Lynn White, Jr. (ed.), *The Transformation of the Roman World: Gibbon's Problem after Two Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 1–29, especially 3–9. The most extensive modern restatement of the organic theory of history and decline is by Spengler; cf., e.g., *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 28–29, 34–36, and 140–142, for some of his early passages on this subject. One example of its appearance in twentieth-century classical scholarship, telling for the context of its author's political environment, is Ernst Kornemann, *Gestalten und Reiche: Essays zur alten Geschichte* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1943), 101–113 ("Griechische und römische Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Antithese"), especially 103.

The vitalistic sense of history goes back to Greek thought about the cyclical nature of history, the basis for its continuing usefulness. The Roman historian Florus, a contemporary of the Antonine emperors, wrote:

So if someone were to look at the Roman people as one human body and to consider its age as a whole, as it began and grew up, as it reached, so to speak, a certain flower of youth and later grew old, then he will find four progressive stages in this. The first age was under the kings for almost 250 years, in which it waged wars with its neighbors around the city of Rome. This will have been its childhood. The following period, from the consulship of Brutus and Collatinus to that of Appius Claudius and Marcus Fulvius, lasted 250 years, in which it conquered Italy. This was a time for men, one greatly spurred on by force of arms, and can therefore be called its youth. Then 200 years to Caesar Augustus, in which it subdued and pacified the whole world. Here now the manhood of empire and a kind of tough maturity. From Caesar Augustus to our century it has been a little less than 200 years, in which it grew old and simmered down, as it were, through the emperors' lack of energy, except that under Emperor Trajan it flexed its muscles and, against everybody's expectation, the old age of the empire has renewed its strength, as if its youth had been restored.⁴⁰

Ancient Christians applied a comparable perspective. An example is Saint Cyprian, who wrote around AD 250:

the world has grown old, and does not remain in its former vigor. It bears witness to its own decline. The rainfall and the sun's warmth are both diminishing; the metals are nearly exhausted; the husbandman is failing in the fields.⁴¹

Even earlier, decay had been a familiar theme in Roman historiography, if more from a moral than from a vitalistic point of view, most forcefully

⁴⁰ Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, Preface; my translation.

⁴¹ Cyprian, *To Demetrius* 3; quoted from Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3: *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944; several rpts.), 665. Several lines in the closing sections of Book 2 of Lucretius' philosophical (and cosmic) epic *On the Nature of Things* refer to the world's aging process; cf. *On the Nature of Things* 2.1116–1174. Lucretius closes this book with the resounding, if melancholic, observation that "everything gradually dissolves and goes to its grave [*var.*, ends on the rocks], exhausted from the long-lasting course of time" (1173–1174). – Mann's film does not explicitly address this theme, but Harry Whittington, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1964), does. Its Marcus Aurelius is contemplating "a world already grown old and tired and sick" (31). Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vol. 2: *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Beck, 1992), 324, observes that at the beginning of the Roman Empire the world had grown tired.

in Sallust's account of how and why the republic had declined from early greatness to social instability and political anarchy.⁴² Such decay is also the reason for the fall of Rome in Mann's film. There Gibbon's influence was reinforced by the participation of Will Durant, a widely read American historian whose book on Roman history, *Caesar and Christ*, Mann knew. In a message cabled to Durant, a mutual acquaintance at Samuel Bronston's production company called Mann "a disciple of yours." Durant is named as consultant in the film's credits although he had initially declined to be involved. But a meeting with Mann changed his mind. (I discuss this context in more detail in Chapter Nine.) Durant had written his Roman history under Gibbon's influence.⁴³ He provided the text for the film's prologue, which he took almost word for word from the opening paragraph of the "Epilogue" to his own book.⁴⁴ In *Caesar and Christ* Durant had incorporated the beginning of Volume 1 of *The Cambridge Medieval History*:

"The two greatest problems in history," says a brilliant scholar of our time, are "how to account for the rise of Rome, and how to account for her fall." We may come nearer to understanding them if we remember that the fall

⁴² Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline* 5.9–14.1; the central passage is quoted in Chapter Nine. Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1.158–182, echoes Sallust's view at the time of Nero. Cf. Erich Koestermann, "Das Problem der römischen Dekadenz bei Sallust und Tacitus," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 1.3 (1972), 781–810.

⁴³ This is evident from Durant's "Preface" (*Caesar and Christ*, vii–viii), which emphasizes the importance of the Romans for contemporary readers. Where Gibbon had been concise, even laconic, in his opening paragraph, Durant is more detailed and hortatory on this aspect of historiography. Cf. further Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), especially 37–42 (chapter entitled "Morals and History"). Durant and his wife Ariel, co-author of the later volumes of *The Story of Civilization*, devoted a section of Volume X to Gibbon: *Rousseau and Revolution: A History of Civilization in France, England, and Germany from 1756, and in the Remainder of Europe from 1715, to 1789* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967; several rpts.), 795–808 and 1013–1014 (notes). They conclude: "All in all, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* may be ranked as the supreme book of the eighteenth century . . . unsurpassed in its time or kind. When we ask how Gibbon came to produce such a masterpiece, we perceive that it was the accidental combination of ambition with money, leisure, and ability; and we wonder how soon such a combination can be expected to recur. Never, said another historian of Rome, Barthold Niebuhr: 'Gibbon's work will never be excelled.'" Cf. the following note.

⁴⁴ Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, 665–672. The "Epilogue" has two sub-sections: "Why Rome Fell" (665–670) and "The Roman Achievement" (670–672). Durant refers to Gibbon several times in this epilogue, calling him "[t]he greatest of historians" (667).

of Rome, like her rise, had not one cause but many, and was not an event but a process spread over 300 years. Some nations have not lasted as long as Rome fell.⁴⁵

In *The Nemesis of Empire* Togo Salmon emphasized the pernicious power of civil war, which to the Romans had been the ultimate social and political evil:

After A.D. 235 and the assumption of the imperial purple by a rude product of the barracks [the soldier-emperor Maximinus Thrax], there was a half century of incredible chaos and confusion. Civil war raged all over the Empire, as commander after commander strove to make himself supreme . . . Naturally, as the assorted rivals for the power of the Caesars were fighting one another, the barbarians seized their chance and attacked across the frontiers.⁴⁶

In his “General Observations” Gibbon had said, shortly after the words from this section already quoted: “The empire of Rome was firmly established by the singular and perfect coalition of its members” (*HDF* 4, 123). Such coalition lies in ruins when we reach the end of Mann’s film. It leaves us with images of the Roman Forum in irremediable political chaos after the death of Commodus, for the empire is now being auctioned off to the highest bidder. This auction is a historical fact, but the film predates it for the sake of greater dramatic impact.⁴⁷ An omniscient narrator is now heard for the second and final time:

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

⁴⁵ Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, 665 and 702 note 1 (reference). Durant is quoting part of the concluding sentence of J. S. Reid, “The Reorganisation of the Empire,” Chapter II of H. M. Gwatkin and J. P. Whitney (eds.), *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 1: *The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911; several rpts.), 24–54. The sentence reads in full: “The two greatest problems in history, how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall, never have been, perhaps never will be, thoroughly solved.” It is, however, far less problematic to account for the rise than to account for the fall of Rome.

⁴⁶ Salmon, *The Nemesis of Empire*, 78.

⁴⁷ The film omits Commodus’ successor Pertinax, who was assassinated after less than three months in power. Gibbon describes him and the auction of the empire, which was bought by the next ruler, Didius Julianus, in Chapters IV and V; see *HDF* 1, 109–121.

Durant provided these words, too, quoted from his “Epilogue” to *Caesar and Christ*.⁴⁸ The scene then fades out. Whereas the opening credits had shown us a series of elegantly stylized paintings in color, many of them based on actual Roman statues, paintings, and works of architecture, now a final card appears on the screen in black and white. The words THE END are flanked by an image of desolation that leaves us with a sense of irreparable loss. On the left appear architectural ruins, most prominently the capital of a column toppling over, and a dejected human figure sitting on the ground. He may be a beggar, representing the state of poverty the Roman people have fallen into. On the right we see an aqueduct, also in ruins, and on the ground in front of it two heads and a foot of large marble statues, now broken apart. The image is in the spirit of Piranesi’s engravings of Roman ruins, although it is not modeled on any particular one.⁴⁹ It is also a visual summary of Gibbon’s description, in his last chapter, of the Roman ruins at the time of Poggio Bracciolini and their emotional effect on all who contemplate them:

the learned Poggius and a friend . . . reposed themselves among the ruins of columns and temples, and viewed from that commanding spot the wide and various prospect of desolation. The place and the object gave ample scope for moralizing on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the products of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave; and it was agreed that, in proportion to her former greatness, the fall of Rome was the more awful and deplorable. (*HDF* 6, 616–617)

Gibbon then quotes at length from Poggio’s *Historiae de varietate fortunae* (*Histories of the Variety of Fortune*, 1447) or, to put it more accurately, Gibbon expresses Poggio’s words in his own inimitable style, thereby fusing his view of the ruins and their impact with Poggio’s.⁵⁰ Gibbon

⁴⁸ Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, 665: “A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within.” The sentence begins the second paragraph of Durant’s epilogue.

⁴⁹ See Luigi Ficacci (ed.), *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: The Complete Etchings* (Cologne: Taschen, 2000), a *catalogue raisonné*.

⁵⁰ This point is well brought out by W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon’s Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 77, and Frank Palmeri, “History as Monument: Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 19 (1989), 225–245, at 226. Palmeri, 227, observes that “Gibbon’s translation of Poggio’s meditation . . . translates into words a kind of painting extremely numerous and popular throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”: *capricci* and *vedute* of architectural scenes from ancient history. Palmeri’s entire essay is a good illustration of the affinity of historiography, here exemplified by Gibbon’s work, to the visual arts. On this aspect of

reports in his *Memoirs* that he decided to write the history of Rome when he had first seen the ruins from a comparable place: “it was at Rome . . . as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.”⁵¹ What Poggio says about the ruins on the one hand contrasts with Gibbon’s description of the glories of Antonine Rome in Chapter II but on the other hand is summarized by what we see at the fade-out of Mann’s film: “The public and private edifices, that were founded for eternity, lie prostrate, naked, and broken, like the limbs of a mighty giant” (*HDF* 6, 617).

In their different ways and in different modes of expression, Gibbon and Mann pursue the same goal, and what a scholar recently said about Gibbon’s work may be applied to Mann’s: “Gibbon presents *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* itself as a fitting replacement for the Roman architectural monuments that survive only in ruins.”⁵² Gibbon and Mann restore these ruins, the one to the mind’s eye, the other on the cinema screen. Gibbon expressed his view of history in a narrative manner that reveals a highly visual sense and is innately cinematic. W. B. Carnochan has referred to “the energy of visual life” and “the gathering visual force of the narrative” in Gibbon and concluded: “Sometimes the technique becomes cinematic, a bare description suddenly taking on visual flair as the camera’s eye moves closer in.”⁵³

Gibbon’s work see in particular the chapter entitled “‘Decline and Fall’: The Authority of Vision,” in Carnochan, 51–78 and 199–202 (notes), and, more briefly, Baridon, *Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome*, 804–810.

⁵¹ Quoted in *HDF* 1, lxxvii. (The temple was, however, that of Juno, not Jupiter.) The last sentence of *HDF* restates this: “It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life” (*HDF* 6, 642–643). Cf. Craddock, “Edward Gibbon and the ‘Ruins of the Capitol,’” and Peter Ghosh, “The Conception of Gibbon’s *History*,” in McKitterick and Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, 271–316.

⁵² Palmeri, “History as Monument,” 242.

⁵³ Carnochan, *Gibbon’s Solitude*, 59 and 62. Cf. the following conclusions that Carnochan reaches: “The opening of Chapter 9 . . . requires a cinematic transition from the close of Chapter 8” (61), “Gibbon’s narrative alternates long views and close-ups with almost cinematic intent; transitions are often pointedly sharp” (74), and: “These final views of the empire [in Chapter LXXI] are close-ups” (75). Carnochan, 62, reminds us of “a painterly Tacitus” as Gibbon’s “master” and quotes Gibbon on Tacitus’ *Germania* in the opening paragraph of Chapter IX: “the Germans were surveyed by the discerning eye, and delineated by the masterly pencil, of Tacitus” (*HDF* 1, 237). Cf. Gibbon’s comment in a footnote in Chapter LXVIII about “the living picture which Thucydides . . . has drawn” of the Athenians (*HDF* 6, 494 note 1) and Thucydides’ own introductory comment (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 7.44.1) on his description of the Battle of Epipolae.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge rightly observed that in Gibbon's work "all is scenical."⁵⁴

The "scattered fragments" of Roman monuments, Gibbon observes later in Chapter LXXI, "surpass the most eloquent descriptions" (*HDF* 6, 638). Their appeal is both emotional and intellectual. So is that of Mann's Rome, for after three hours spent with one of the most intelligent of historical epics we have become closely involved in a story that demonstrates how great a loss for Western civilization the fall of Rome represents. Gibbon's work has always elicited an emotional response from its readers. In an essay appropriately called "Gibbon's Paradise Lost," Lewis Curtis has explained Gibbon's appeal:

The Decline and Fall is a memorial oration. It is, to boot, a sad, stupendous warning to the governing class . . . His entire history revolves around a formula, around three words . . . These words are virtue, wisdom, and power . . . The political history of the world is no more than a record of the use or abuse of this formula.⁵⁵

With some obvious adjustments we can understand Mann's film, if on a smaller scale than Gibbon's work, to be just such a commemoration, a mournful contemplation clothed in the deceptively simple fabric of epic cinema. My next quotations will corroborate this point. First, Curtis on Gibbon:

Gibbon chants a dirge . . . It is the death of the heroic spirit that he mourns . . . The hero [of his book] is the potential character of man. About this character Gibbon wrote the mightiest epic of the century . . . a prose epic, a tragic, epic history, a study, like *Paradise Lost*, in the degeneration of human character.⁵⁶

Sections of Gibbon's Chapter II, entitled "Decline of Courage" and "Decline of Genius," exemplify Curtis's observation. Gibbon wrote:

⁵⁴ Quoted from Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude*, 60, with source reference at 201 note 6.

⁵⁵ Lewis P. Curtis, "Gibbon's Paradise Lost," in Frederick W. Hilles (ed.), *The Age of Johnson: Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 73–90; quotations at 79 and 82. Cf. Curtis, 80. Curtis follows Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932; rpt. as "second edition," 2003), 117–118, who had written: "The *Decline and Fall* is a history, yes; but something more than a history, a memorial oration: Gibbon is commemorating the death of ancient civilization."

⁵⁶ Curtis, "Gibbon's Paradise Lost," 88–89.

This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated . . . the decline of [literary] genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste.⁵⁷

Carnochan has summarized this side of Gibbon in the most simple and most convincing manner: “Loss was his truest theme.”⁵⁸

Now Mann. When an interviewer mentioned that in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the director had “revealed the madness of the world, the decline of the spirit,” Mann replied:

Of course! (*He pounds the table vehemently.*) That’s all I wanted to dramatize. Now I guarantee you there is no one person [among reviewers] that had read Gibbon . . . And for them to start to say: ‘This isn’t Gibbon’ – well this is a lot of crap! . . . Then they scream and claim it is not historically accurate. It had more truth in it than untruth.⁵⁹

Mann’s strong emotional reaction shows how much he was dedicated to history and historical filmmaking. Realizing this helps us understand Mann’s artistic creed, expressed in moving terms that those who know his body of work will find entirely convincing:

I believe in the nobility of the human spirit. It is that for which I look in a subject I am to direct . . . This is what drama is. This is what pictures are all about. I don’t believe in anything else.⁶⁰

Like Gibbon, Mann mourns the death of the noble and heroic spirit of the Romans. Livius, the protagonist of his film, has struggled to keep Marcus Aurelius’ vision of Rome alive. (Details on the ending appear in Chapter One.) He has defeated and killed Commodus – unhistorically but to the satisfaction of all viewers. At the film’s end Livius is deservedly in line to the throne but rejects it. Instead he retreats with Lucilla, Marcus’ daughter, into private life. Such an ending goes against standard cinematic

⁵⁷ *HDF* 1, 65–67; quotations from 65 and 67.

⁵⁸ Carnochan, “Gibbon’s Feelings,” 343. He links the reasons for this to Gibbon’s own experiences of loss since his childhood.

⁵⁹ Both quotations are from Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 53–54.

⁶⁰ Mann, “Empire Demolition” (closing paragraph). When Curtis, “Gibbon’s Paradise Lost,” 90, speaks of Gibbon’s “defense of aristocratic principles,” we may understand Mann’s perspective on history in a comparable way, if not in any class-conscious sense. On Gibbon cf. Gerald J. Gruman, “‘Balance’ and ‘Excess’ as Gibbon’s Explanation of the Decline and Fall,” *History and Theory*, 1 (1960), 75–85.

conventions, according to which a dedicated hero achieves his goals and receives his reward at the end. But in Mann's film not even this heroic general can save Rome from the inevitable. Mann does not end his work on a note of uplift, but then he had not begun it on one, either. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is a melancholic and, to responsive viewers, a sad-denning film.⁶¹ Gibbon would have disliked its factual inaccuracies, but he would have understood its intent.

As Gibbon wrote in the "General Observations": "This awful revolution [of the decline and fall of Rome] may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age" (*HDF* 4, 121). About one and three-quarter centuries later, an American film director expressed practically the same view. Mann was aware of the importance of the past for the present and even for the future, as some of his words quoted above reveal. His unusual perspective on the Romans, unique in Hollywood cinema, is due at least in part to the fact that Gibbon, Mann's inspiration, wrote from a Roman point of view:

he has identified himself with his subject, as no other historian has done. A contemporary critic said of him that he came at last to believe he was the Roman Empire, and though this was said in jest by an unfriendly critic, it contains a real element of truth. For [he] was possessed and obsessed by the majestic spirit of Rome . . . He felt as a Roman; he thought as a Roman, he wrote as a Roman. Even when he is most representative of the spirit of his own age . . . he sees that civilization as a kind of revived and extended *pax Romana*. Gibbon's style . . . possesses the authentic and living spirit of classical rhetoric.⁶²

Mann told his cinematic story from a comparable starting point and attempted to achieve a feeling for Roman history from a Roman perspective. The Romans are not meant to be objects of audiences' hatred or derision as in most other films about them but a people worth knowing and liking, a society whose fall is a loss for culture and history. To those who can see more than mere spectacle, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is a tragic epic about ancient history. So, in its own and grander way, is Gibbon's work. E. M. W. Tillyard has put the case well:

The notion, propounded by [the Roman rhetorician] Quintilian, that the province of history lay close to, or even overlapped, that of poetry . . . con-

⁶¹ The main theme in Dimitri Tiomkin's score for the film has made this clear from the beginning. It is first heard under the opening credits and appears for the last time together with the title card THE END. It is mournful, even funereal. Cf. Chapter One.

⁶² Dawson, "Edward Gibbon and the Fall of Rome," 335 and 337. Cf. Dawson, 333.

tinued through the neo-classic age. Gibbon was open to it and conceived of his own great historical work much as an epic writer . . . conceived of his heroic poem. . . . He was in his way the heir of Spenser, Milton, and Pope . . . like the epic poet who begins in the middle of things, Gibbon looks back telling us much of the past and looks prophetically into the future.⁶³

⁶³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954; rpt. 1966), 510, 513, and 525. Tillyard's first epic writer is Homer, his last is Gibbon. The entire chapter on Gibbon (Tillyard, 510–527) is worth keeping in mind. Cf. further Harold Bond, *The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon* (1960; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), especially 88 and 144; Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding and Gibbon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 213–268, and Baridon, *Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome*, 742–749. Cf. Roy Porter, *Gibbon: Making History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 86 and 89: Gibbon "ensured that each volume ended at a point of dramatic suspense . . . Suspense is Gibbon's dramatic forte." See also Patricia Craddock, "Contemplative Heroes and Gibbon's Historical Imagination," in Donald R. Kelley and David Harris Sacks (eds.), *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain: History, Rhetoric, and Fiction, 1500–1800* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 343–359, especially 343–345. The theory that poetry, especially epic and tragedy, is related to, and because of the universal truths it expresses, even greater than, history and historiography goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982; rpt. 1983), 32, observes that Gibbon's work "was intended to be a history" but that "the phrase 'decline and fall' in the title indicates the narrative principle on which Gibbon selected and arranged his material: that is his *mythos*, and without such a *mythos* the book could have no shape." Cf. Frye, 46–47 and 92. Gibbon himself wrote an *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* in 1762, on which see Craddock, 349–350, and now J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1: *The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 208–239, with additional references. Peter Ghosh, "Gibbon's Timeless Verity: Nature and Neo-Classicism in the Late Enlightenment," in Womersley (ed.), *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays*, 121–163, examines "the timeless or 'unhistorical' elements in Gibbon's history" (122). Timeless verity is one of the provinces of art and one of the reasons why Aristotle extolled literature over historiography. That Gibbon was himself attuned to the importance of literature for history and to the innate visual quality of narrative literature and historiography is made abundantly clear throughout *HDF*; a brief but representative example occurs in one of his notes in Chapter XL in the context of the ancient games, when Gibbon exhorts his readers: "Read and feel the twenty-third book of the Iliad, a living picture of manners, passions, and the whole form and spirit of the chariot-race" (*HDF* 4, 181 n. 3). Cf. Porter, 89: "Gibbon constantly reminds us that history is a show . . . Gibbon's dominant metaphor portrays the world as a theatre." See further Porter, 160, on the connections between *HDF* and literature, and Martine Watson Brownley, "The Theatrical World of the 'Decline and Fall'." *Papers on Language and Literature*, 15 (1979), 263–277. Patricia Craddock, "History's Stories, Historians' Accounts: Why Take Edward Gibbon's Word?" in Carla H. Hay (ed.), *The Past as Prologue: Essays to Celebrate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of ASECS* [American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies] (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 281–301, examines practical and theoretical links between historiography and historical fiction and emphasizes their

Some of Tillyard's points about Gibbon in essence apply to the theme of Mann's film, as when Tillyard observes:

the first principle of the *Decline and Fall* was that it should express certain great moral truths . . . As courage, liberty, and enlightenment make for progress, so cowardice, slavery, barbarism, and fanaticism make for chaos. Gibbon thought of slavery as the cringing subservience of men to a tyrannical master. Barbarism and fanaticism are both the opposites of enlightenment.⁶⁴

With his emphasis on great moral truths as lessons from the past for the present, Gibbon placed himself in the tradition of ancient historians, who had derived their understanding of history and its importance from the literary tradition, especially from Homer. (Cf. Chapter Nine.) What Tillyard observed about Gibbon is illustrated and exemplified in Mann's film by the sequence in the Roman senate. Mann even echoed the famous – to some, infamous – views about Christianity in Gibbon's Chapters XV and XVI.⁶⁵ Mann wrote about his film:

differences. Cochrane, "The Mind of Edward Gibbon," 166, concludes about Gibbon's work that "the permanent essential value of his work is as literature. In saying this I do not for a moment admit that it ceases to be history." Cf. Bowersock, *Gibbon's Historical Imagination*, 10 and 16: "Gibbon shaped his truth as if it were fiction, preserving thereby the animation of human history and the art of the novelist . . . Gibbon's work was not scholarship but something that surpassed scholarship: literature of genius." As Lionel Gossman, *The Empire Unpossessed: An Essay on Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 154 note 16, aptly put it: "As a historical work ceases to be valued as history, it will increasingly depend for its survival on whatever literary quality it may have. Gibbon himself was convinced that this is the destiny of historical writing." Gossman then refers to Gibbon's "Remarques sur les Ouvrages et sur le Caractère de Salluste, Jules César, Cornelius Nepos, et Tite-Live" (1756), in John Lord Sheffield (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, vol. 4: *Classical and Critical* (1814; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1971), 399–434, where see 430–431.

⁶⁴ Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background*, 514 and 518.

⁶⁵ On Gibbon and Christianity see now especially J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Primitive Church," in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48–68. For different perspectives on early Christianity and the Romans cf., among numerous other works, M. L. W. Laistner, *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951; several rpts.); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Michael Walsh, *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, tr. Annabel Bedini (Norman: University of

I did not want to make another *Quo Vadis?* . . . another *Spartacus*, or any of the others because these stories were the stories of the Christ. Those films gave the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about, but it was a minor incident in the greatness of the Roman Empire.⁶⁶

With Gibbon as inspiration for its approach to Antonine history and its presentation of the past, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is an eloquent restatement in images and words of parts of the history that Gibbon recounted in his first volume, at least as far as commercial constraints allow.⁶⁷ Thirty-five years after its appearance, Mann's film provided the model for *Gladiator* and in this way influenced the current revival of ancient Rome on our film and television screens.⁶⁸ Despite some changes and ambiguities, *Gladiator* keeps Mann's view of Rome as a society worth preserving, although the Colosseum is the city's and the empire's defining symbol.⁶⁹ The introductory text of *Gladiator* draws viewers' attention to "the promise of peace throughout the empire" that is to follow Marcus Aurelius' frontier campaign, and the last words of its hero Maximus, the equivalent of Mann's Livius, reaffirm the value of Livius' struggle: "There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized. These are the wishes of

Oklahoma Press, 1994); G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" (1963), in M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 210–249; rpt. in G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streecher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105–152.

⁶⁶ Mann, "Empire Demolition." Mann had directed the Fire of Rome sequence for Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951). The opening sequence of *Spartacus* is by Mann. Cf. Elley, *The Epic Film*, 105, on Gibbon and Mann's film: "the film-makers found a suitable soulmate: Gibbon also placed little importance on Christianity, preferring a broader view of the reasons for the collapse of the Empire, and he too was apt to let strict chronology fall victim to his overall plan."

⁶⁷ We could apply the brief but eloquent summation of Gibbon's "claim to a place in history" given by Craddock, "Contemplative Heroes and Gibbon's Historical Imagination," 357, to Mann, if on a smaller scale and with some adjustments.

⁶⁸ Glen Bowersock, "De Gibbon á 'Gladiator': Les prophètes de la décadence," tr. Pascal Aquien, *L'Histoire*, 254 (May, 2001), 46–47 and 49–51, provides an introductory overview that disdains to argue its case in detail. Bowersock mentions *The Fall of the Roman Empire* only in passing and with facile disparagement ("un film qui aurait épouvanté Gibbon," 50); he singles out *Gladiator* as noteworthy for omitting Christianity from its plot (51) without seeming to know that this is in imitation of Mann's film.

⁶⁹ Cf. my "Gladiator and the Colosseum: Ambiguities of Spectacle," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 87–110.

Marcus Aurelius.”⁷⁰ Largely because Mann’s film is now an intermediary between Gibbon and *Gladiator*, the historian of the Roman Empire continues to exert his influence in a part of modern culture where most people would not think to look for it.

⁷⁰ In the “First Draft Revised” (April 4, 1998) of David Franzoni’s screenplay for *Gladiator* Marcus says to the Romans: “For nine hundred years architects, mathematicians, poets, and philosophers have fled within her arms sheltered from superstition, prejudice, hate, and every form of human cruelty. We Romans have become a light in the barbarian night!” Marcus also calls Rome “this one heart of humankind.” The quotations are from http://www.hundland.com/scripts/Gladiator_FirstDraft.txt. In view of my comments on the ending of *Gladiator* in Chapter One it is revealing that Marcus Aurelius’ short speech did not make it into the film as released.

CHAPTER NINE

Fact, Fiction, and the Feeling of History

Martin M. Winkler

A few days after receiving a copy of her historical novel *The Tory Lover*, Henry James wrote his friend Sarah Orne Jewett a letter of thanks for her gift. He also took the opportunity to outline his reservations about historical fiction in most gentlemanly terms, if not without some firmness:

it would take me some time to disembroil the tangle of saying to you at once how I appreciate the charming touch, tact and taste of this ingenious exercise, and how little I am in sympathy with experiments of its general (to my sense) misguided stamp . . . The “historic” novel is, for me, condemned, even in cases of labour as delicate as yours, to a fatal *cheapness*, for the simple reason that the difficulty of the job is inordinate and that a mere *escamotage*, in the interest of ease, and of the abysmal public *naïveté* becomes inevitable. You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like – *the* real thing is almost impossible to do, and in its essence the whole effect is as nought. I mean the invention, the representation of the old CONSCIOUSNESS, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world were non-existent. You have to *think* with your modern apparatus a man, a woman – or rather fifty – whose own thinking was intensely otherwise conditioned. You have to simplify back by an amazing *tour de force* – and even then it’s all humbug. But there is a shade of the (even then) humbug that

may amuse . . . It's when the extinct soul talks, and the earlier consciousness airs itself, that the pitfalls multiply and the "cheap" way has to serve. I speak in general, I needn't keep insisting, and I speak grossly, summarily, by rude and provisional signs, in order to suggest my sentiment at all.¹

Was James right to condemn the historical novel? No doubt he knew that the genre had enjoyed a long and distinguished ancestry since Cervantes, that epic poetry, the novel's precursor, had told stories about the distant past since Greek and Roman antiquity, and that drama, especially tragedy, had done much the same, if in yet another genre. All these genres present narratives about history. Since James's letter was written, however, historical narratives have found even wider-reaching outlets in the visual media, mainly in the cinema and its offshoot, television. So it is legitimate to ask if verbal and visual ways of storytelling are indeed doomed to being mere sleight of hand – James's "*escamotage*." The Master's verdict is obviously something to reckon with, even if it is doubtful that many now or even then would wholeheartedly agree with him. But his letter provides us with a stimulating point of departure for posing the following question: What, if any, is the value of narratives that combine facts about the past with newly invented fiction?

This chapter aims at providing an answer, if not necessarily a conclusive one, to that question. I will argue, as it were, the case for the defense of serious and committed fiction based on history as exemplified in the genre of epic cinema, with special focus on Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first part of the chapter surveys the debate over historiography vis-à-vis historical fiction from two perspectives. I adduce authors who argue for the superiority of creative literature. They stand against what we might call "the Henry James position," which historians have generally taken as well. I also call on historians and literary scholars who grant that principles of literary composition are crucial for the writing of history. Some important differences between ancient Greek and Roman and modern historiography will become apparent, too. I quote my "expert witnesses" at greater length than readers might at first expect. Thus this chapter differs from the others in this book by presenting more a synthesis of existing views than an original analysis. (The latter occurs mainly in the chapter's second part.) But the reason for

¹ Quoted from Leon Edel (ed.), *Henry James: Letters*, vol. 4: 1895–1916 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1984), 208–209. In a letter to William Dean Howells of January 25, 1902, James was more censorious: "dear Sarah Jewett sent me not long since a Revolutionary Romance, with officers over their wine etc., and Paul Jones terrorizing the sea, that was a thing to make the angels weep." Quoted from Edel, 221–225, at 223.

such a procedure is, in my view, justifiable or even compelling, for while the similarities and differences between fact and fiction have been debated almost endlessly, this debate has only recently been applied to the cinema. Both sides of my overview in the first part of this chapter are therefore in the nature of a mini-anthology of relevant voices, supplemented by brief comments. Readers are especially requested to keep in mind the visual narratives that most of the literary and historical authors quoted could not yet imagine or know. Then, in the second part, I turn to Mann's film and examine certain of its key features on the basis of my preceding discussion. Ultimately I hope to provide a test case, a kind of *apologia pro pellicula historiographica*, that can be applied to other historical films. Some of my argument in the present chapter is related to what I have discussed in the chapter on Edward Gibbon.

I make no fundamental or generic distinction between textual and visual narratives but consider both as equals, although there are obvious differences.² Literary storytelling is limited to words or to words supported by visuals, as in drama; cinematic storytelling occurs primarily but not exclusively in images. But the close affinities between verbal and visual narratives have been well known since antiquity and are best expressed in the famous saying by Simonides of Keos that painting is silent poetry while poetry is painting that speaks. Horace restated the idea in his influential *Art of Poetry* in a phrase that has sometimes been misunderstood: *ut pictura poesis* ("like painting, poetry").³ The narrator in Longus' novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, which dates to the late second century AD, demonstrates that one and the same story can be told equally well in images as in words when he explains how he came to write his novel by describing a narrative painting that inspired it.⁴ During the time

² On differences between textual and visual narratives see, e.g., Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 121–140.

³ The most important classical sources are Plutarch, *Moralia* 17f–18a (in "How the Young Man Should Study Poetry") and 346f–347c (in "Were the Athenians More Famous in War or in Wisdom?" = "On the Fame of the Athenians"); Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d and *Republic* 595a–608b; Cicero, *On Invention* 2.1 (painting and rhetoric); Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 5.6.9; Horace, *Art of Poetry* 361 (*ut pictura poesis*); Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines* 1.1–2; Philostratus the Younger, *Imagines*, Preface; Dio Chrysostom, *Olympicus* (*Oration* 12), 26, 44–46, and 61–72; sculptor (Phidias) as rival to poet (Homer); Demetrius, *On Style* 14 (writing analogous to sculpture). Cf. also Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a8–1448a18 (in Chapter 1), 1450a24–28 and 1450a37–b3 (both passages in Chapter 6), and Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 12.10.1–9 (comparison of painters and sculptors with orators in the context of the *genus orationis*).

⁴ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, Prologue. I have examined the affinities between textual and visual narratives and what I have called "classical film philology" in Martin M. Winkler,

of the Antonines the philosophical orator Maximus of Tyre compared the benefit that the soul may derive from historical accounts, which represent the past in words, with the pleasure the eye may derive from pictures, which represent their objects visually.⁵ In the Enlightenment, Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766) examines the limits of painting and poetry, to paraphrase the subtitle of his work. I here follow this tradition, if on a considerably smaller scale, for an extension of the old Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns that encompasses the cinema as a major representative of our highly visual culture.

1. Feeling in Historical Fiction and Historiography

If we take him literally, Henry James, without perhaps intending to do so, dismisses out of hand all creative literature set in the past, not just novels, because some kind of representation of past consciousness is central to every form of historical narrative. Historical dramas and novels include some of the greatest works ever written. While it is impossible and pointless to list them, a few examples may indicate how large and untenable James's claim is. Many of the works of Shakespeare would be condemned: all the *Histories* and the Roman plays, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, both set centuries before the Elizabethan age, and *Hamlet*.⁶ So would all Greek and Roman tragedies based on myths be condemned, which the ancients considered to be inseparable from history. The one surviving Attic tragedy based on historical events, Aeschylus' *Persians*, would also have to be classed as "humbug," not least for its clear divergence from historical fact. So would the most famous and influential ancient epics: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, which inextricably links myth and history, and Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Lucan's is a historical epic with

Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's New Light (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 20–69 (chapter entitled "A Certain Tendency in Classical Philology"), with extensive further references.

⁵ Maximus of Tyre, "Proper Entertainment" (= *Oration* 22) 6. Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; rpt. 1986), 115, quotes this passage in connection with the Column of Marcus Aurelius.

⁶ The story of Hamlet was first told in the late twelfth century in Books Three and Four of Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, but it goes back to the ninth century. Cf. Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet* (Arden Shakespeare; 1982; rpt. London: Thomson, 2003), 85–89. Jenkins, 259 (in note on *Hamlet* 2.2.394: Polonius' "tragical-historical"), aptly reminds us that Shakespeare's play was the first to be designated a "Tragicall Historie" on the title pages of its First and Second Quarto editions. The strictly factual (history) is inextricably enmeshed with the creatively modified (tragedy).

supernatural overtones and considerable historical license. To mention just one instance, Lucan has Cicero being present at the Battle of Pharsalus, even giving a speech, although Cicero was not there.⁷ To return to the novel, the same is true for Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. To add further instances of supposedly fatal cheapness would be a melancholic exercise: large numbers of great works would have to be designated as *tours de force* – not a term of praise in James's context – or, worse, would have to be swept into the ashcan of historical *escamotage*. Do we really want to go this far? Did James? Or would he upon second thoughts have revised his sweeping claims? We cannot know the answer to the last two questions, so a reflection on what James's letter implies can take us only so far. A better avenue to understand the nature of historical fiction may lie open to us if, instead of condemning it out of hand, we ask about the creative artists' impulses for such work, specifically about their reverence for the past and their conviction of its importance for the present and future – in other words, about their feeling of history.

A little over a century and a half before James wrote his letter, one of the most famous British authors of historical fiction had anticipated and rejected "that universal contempt, which the world . . . have cast on all historical writers, who do not draw their materials from records" and had claimed: "our labours have sufficient title to the name of history." In Book IX, Chapter I of *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), Henry Fielding defended "one of the most useful as well as entertaining of all kinds of writing" and maintained: "To invent good stories, and to tell them well, are possibly very rare talents." This chapter, entitled "Of those who lawfully may, and of those who may not write such Histories as this," provides a brief but eloquent defense of history turned into fiction. The qualifications that Fielding requires authors of such works to fulfill are several. The first is "genius." The second is "learning" as exemplified by "Homer and Milton, who, though they added the ornament of numbers to their works, were both historians of our order [because they] were masters of all the learning of their times." The third is "knowledge . . . to be had by conversation," which Fielding contrasts with the knowledge of "those learned pedants, whose lives have been entirely consumed in colleges, and among books." In Fielding's opinion "the true practical system" of writing history "can only be learnt in the

⁷ Lucan, *Pharsalia* 7.62–85. Cf. the comments by Frederick M. Ahl, *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 160–163, on this passage. Ahl, 162 note 29, cites ancient and modern references concerning Cicero's absence from Pharsalus.

world." But these three qualifications are worthless unless they are joined by a fourth, the most decisive one:

Nor will all the qualities I have hitherto given my historian avail him, unless he have what is generally meant by a good heart, and be capable of feeling. The author who will make me weep, says Horace, must first weep himself.⁸

Fielding's mention of Horace points us, *in nuce*, to the age of Romanticism. Today few will adhere to the necessity of an author's personal emotional experience for literary composition. But Fielding is correct to assert the importance of feelings for historical fiction. What kind of writing, either creative or expository, could do without them?

In this context it is advisable briefly to consider one other possible form of historical narrative akin to the novel, that of romance. Even if we agree with Fielding's argument, would we not prefer to classify *Tom Jones* as a romance rather than as a history? A little over a century later, another great novelist points out some important differences between novel and romance. In his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Nathaniel Hawthorne carefully distinguished between romance and novel:

The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former – while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture . . . The point of view in which this Tale comes under the Romantic definition, lies in the attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us.⁹

Since Hawthorne did not presume to aim at minute fidelity, he considered *The House of the Seven Gables* a romance. Someone like Fielding might well have assented to Hawthorne's distinction. But today we are

⁸ The above quotations are taken from R. P. C. Mutter (ed.), *Henry Fielding: The History of Tom Jones* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; several rpts.), 435–439. Fielding summarizes Horace, *Art of Poetry* 102–103.

⁹ Quoted from Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Novels*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: Viking / Library of America, 1983), 351.

more likely to classify both *Tom Jones* and *The House of the Seven Gables* under the same heading, that of the novel. Not least, Hawthorne's point about the links between the past and the present, which is itself turning ceaselessly into the past, is sufficient justification. History, novel, romance – all are kindred spirits, thematically inseparable.

Fielding and other authors of historical fiction whose works transcend the status of being mere commodities have had any number of distinguished allies on their side. Sir Philip Sidney had been one of the most influential in the late sixteenth century. In *A Defence of Poetry* he argues for the pre-eminence of literature over moral philosophy and history. In a stylistic *tour de force* – I use the term in a sense different from James's – Sidney observes about the historian:

The historian . . . , laden with old mouse-eaten records, authorizing himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundations of hearsay; having much ado to accord differing writers and to pick truth out of their partiality; better acquainted with a thousand years ago than with the present age, and yet better knowing how this world goeth than how his own wit runneth; curious for antiquities and inquisitive of novelties; a wonder to young folks and a tyrant in table talk, denieth, in a great chafe, that any man for teaching of virtue, and virtuous actions is comparable to him.¹⁰

Sidney devotes several pages to this topic. "Many times," he says, the historian "must tell events whereof he can yield no cause; or, if he do, it must be poetically." Sidney concludes, predictably:

So then the best of the historian is subject to the poet; for whatsoever action, or faction, whatsoever counsel, policy, or war stratagem the historian is bound to recite, that may the poet (if he list) with his imitation make his own, beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting, as it please him: having all, from Dante's heaven to his hell, under the authority of his pen . . .

Now, to that which commonly is attributed to the praise of history, in respect of the notable learning is got by marking the success, as though therein a man should see virtue exalted and vice punished – truly that commendation is particular to poetry, and far off from history . . .

I conclude, therefore, that he [the poet] excelleth history, not only in furnishing the mind with knowledge, but in setting it forward to that

¹⁰ Quoted from Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (eds.), *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 83–84.

which deserveth to be called and accounted good: which setting forward, and moving to well-doing, indeed setteth the laurel crown upon the poets as victorious . . .¹¹

An unlikely ancient ally to Sidney and Fielding is the sophist and satirist Lucian of Samosata, who in one of his rare serious works addresses the question of how to write history. To put it anachronistically, at first sight Lucian seems to be in Henry James's camp, for he repeatedly and appropriately asserts with great force the historian's responsibility toward facts and historical truth. Lucian summarizes his view of the ideal historian in the following words:

There stands my model, then: fearless, incorruptible, independent, a believer in frankness and veracity; one that will call a spade a spade, make no concessions to likes and dislikes, nor spare any man for pity or respect or propriety; an impartial judge, kind to all, but too kind to none; a literary cosmopolite with neither suzerain nor king, never heeding what this or that man may think, but setting down the thing that befell.¹²

But shortly after this Lucian emphasizes the importance of a historian's artistic side, which puts him near visual and literary artists. In view of historical cinema, my larger context, I quote Lucian's analogy between the verbal and the visual, which we saw goes back to Simonides, at greater length:

The historian's spirit should not be without a touch of the poetical; it needs, like poetry, to employ impressive and exalted tones . . . The historian, we may say, should be like Phidias, Praxiteles, Alcamenes, or any great sculptor . . . their art consisted in . . . the right arrangement of their material. The historian's business is similar – to superinduce upon events the charm of order, and set them forth in the most lucid fashion he can manage. When subsequently a hearer feels as though he were looking at what is being told him, and expresses his approval, then our historical Phidias's work has reached perfection, and received its appropriate reward.¹³

¹¹ Quotations from Duncan-Jones and Van Dorsten (eds.), *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, 89–90.

¹² Lucian, *The Way to Write History* 41, quoted from H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 109–136, at 129.

¹³ Lucian, *The Way to Write History* 45 and 51, quoted from Fowler and Fowler, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, 130 and 132.

The historian's work "is nothing from beginning to end but a long narrative; it must therefore be graced with the narrative virtues."¹⁴

Lucian was by no means the first to say this. The most famous and influential earlier statement about the pre-eminence of literature over history appeared in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In Chapter IX Aristotle relates the fundamental affinities between historian and poet that give the latter an advantage over the former:

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular . . . and it is this universality at which poetry aims . . . even subjects that are known are known only to a few, and yet give pleasure to all . . . And even if he [the poet] chances to take an historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker.¹⁵

Quintilian, the Roman orator and teacher of rhetoric, reconfirmed Aristotle's position in the second century AD when he made the following observation about historiography in his handbook on rhetorical training:

It is closest to the poets and in certain ways a poem written in prose. And it is written for the sake of telling, not proving, something. The whole work is being composed not to incite to an action or a present cause [literally, "a present fight"] but to make posterity remember the past and the fame of the work's genius. And for that reason it avoids tediousness by employ-

¹⁴ Lucian, *The Way to Write History* 55, quoted from Fowler and Fowler, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, 133. The entire paragraph is important for the present context.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a37–b32, quoted from S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts, with a Critical Text and Translation of The Poetics*, 4th ed. (1907; rpt. New York: Dover, 1951; several rpts.), 35 and 37. The last phrase quoted explains the etymology of the Greek word for "poet." While there is a flood of more recent studies of Aristotle and his *Poetics*, this older work is still valuable. See also Butcher, 163–198 (chapter entitled "Poetic Truth"). Cf. further G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Aristotle on History and Poetry (Poetics 9, 1451a36–b11)," in Barbara Levick (ed.), *The Ancient Historian and His Materials* (Farnborough: Gregg, 1975), 45–58; rpt. in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 23–32.

ing less of everyday language and more of a free shaping of its narrative style.¹⁶

¹⁶ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 10.1.31; my translation. On literary modes of composition in ancient historiography cf., e.g., Christopher Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Antoine Foucher, *Historia proxima poetis: L'influence de la poésie épique sur le style des historiens latins de Salluste à Ammien Marcellin* (Brussels: Latomus, 2000; the main title is a quotation from this passage of Quintilian). On Tacitus, Rome's greatest historian (and not quite a model of objectivity), see, e.g., Patrick Sinclair, *Tacitus the Sententious Historian: A Sociology of Rhetoric in Annales 1–6* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Mario Lauletta, *L'intreccio degli stili in Tacito: Intertestualità prosa-poesia nella letteratura storiografica* (Naples: Arte tipografica, 1998); and Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006). For a specific example in Tacitus see A. J. Woodman, "Amateur Dramatics at the Court of Nero: *Annals* 15.48–74," in T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman (eds.), *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 104–128. Among numerous other studies of ancient historiography and its fictional and rhetorical elements see especially the following: A. W. Gomme, *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954); Hermann Strasburger, *Die Wesensbestimmung der Geschichte durch die antike Geschichtsschreibung*, 3rd ed. (1975), rpt. in Hermann Strasburger, *Studien zur alten Geschichte*, vol. 2, ed. Walter Schmitthenner and Renate Zoepffel (Hildesheim: Olms, 1982), 964–1016; Charles William Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; rpt. 1988); A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), especially 74–78 on Cicero, *On the Orator* 2.51–64, and the orator's embellishment or elaboration (*ornatio*) by plausible details as a parallel to that of historians; Averil Cameron (ed.), *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (1989; rpt. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Christopher Pelling, "Truth and Fiction in Plutarch's Lives," in D. A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19–52; rpt. in Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History: Eighteen Studies* (London: Classical Press of Wales / Duckworth, 2002), 143–170; Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 29–53 (chapter entitled "The Herodotean and the Thucydidean Tradition"); José Miguel Alonso-Núñez (ed.), *Geschichtsbild und Geschichtsdenken im Altertum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991); T. P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Historiography* (1979; rpt. Bristol: Bristol Phoenix, 2003), especially 27–40 (chapter entitled "History and Rhetoric") and 41–53 (chapter entitled "Unhistorical Thinking," with the following observation at 52: "We do not find it too hard to recognize the inventive technique [of historians like Livy or Dionysius of Halicarnassus] in comparatively unimportant details, but it does not come naturally to us to expect the *big lie* as well"), and *Historiography and Imagination: Eight Essays on Roman Culture* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994); Timothy D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Christina Shuttleworth Kraus (ed.), *The Limits of Historiography: Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); David S. Potter, *Literary Texts and the Roman Historian* (London: Routledge, 1999); Christopher Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London: Routledge, 2000). – The admixture of fiction or downright lies into historiography has been a regular subject of scholars' debates since Herodotus; on this topic see especially Emilio Gabba, "True History and False History in Classical Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 71

Conversely, even the earliest, most popular, and most influential of ancient authors – Homer – was regularly considered a historian.¹⁷ Herodotus, the “father of history,” as Cicero called him, was commemorated in an inscription recently discovered in his birthplace Halicarnassus as “the prose Homer.”¹⁸ Poetry and historiography are sister arts. The ancients seem to have understood this better than we do. Our modern emphasis on the strictest demands for accuracy of historical research and on a historian’s objectivity and our fixation on what the past had really been like – *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – have made a number of ancient historians, most notably Herodotus, fall short of our standards.¹⁹ The father of history would never survive in a modern university department. Classical scholar A. J. Woodman explains why:

(1981), 50–62; W. Kendrick Pritchett, *The Liar School of Herodotos* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1993); J. L. Moles, “Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides,” and T. P. Wiseman, “Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity,” both in Christopher Gill and T. P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press / Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 88–121 and 122–146. On Thucydides cf. F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythohistoricus* (1907; rpt. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); W. R. Connor, “A Post-Modernist Thucydides?” *The Classical Journal*, 72 (1977), 289–298; Simon Hornblower, “Narratology and Narrative Techniques in Thucydides,” in Simon Hornblower (ed.), *Greek Historiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 131–166; and Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides and Pindar: Historical Narrative and the World of Epinikian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; rpt. 2006). For general surveys of the history of historiography, beginning with antiquity, see especially Donald R. Kelley (ed.), *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), and Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Classical scholarship has demonstrated the continuity from epic to historiography. Fundamental studies are Hermann Strasburger, *Homer und die Geschichtsschreibung* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Abh. 1, 1972; Heidelberg: Winter, 1972), and Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980), 139–150 and 307–308 (notes), a chapter entitled “Zur Entstehung des geschichtlichen Bewußtseins.”

¹⁸ Cf. Peter Green, “The Great Marathon Man,” *The New York Review of Books* (May 15, 2008), 33–34 and 44, at 34. On the same page Green comments about Herodotus: “His greatest debt was undoubtedly to Homer, who showed him how to manage characterization, speeches, the manipulation of time sequences, and vivid description, and also gave him his first great theme, that of recording great deeds for posterity.” The quotation is from Cicero, *On the Laws* 1.5.

¹⁹ For a thorough examination of Leopold von Ranke’s famous phrase from 1824 see Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8–14. Bann, 10, quotes Ranke in the original. That Ranke meant his words to describe his first book and not to prescribe a guideline for other historians is generally ignored. The survey by

Though we today see poetry, oratory and historiography as three separate genres, the ancients saw them as three different species of the same genus – rhetoric . . . Cicero himself expressly tells us that classical historiography is *opus oratorium maxime*, ‘a particularly rhetorical activity’. . . classical historians, like their modern namesakes, are indeed rhetorical in the sense that they manipulate factual truths for dramatic purposes . . . Cicero understood the word ‘rhetorical’ to include also the narrative of ‘what might or could have happened’. . . [Such reflections] suggest very strongly that the classical view of historical truth was indeed different from our own.²⁰

Woodman bases much of his argument on the rhetorical principle of *inventio*, which Cicero defined as “the devising of matter true or lifelike which will make a case appear convincing”; what is convincing is “that which for the most part happens or which does not strain credibility or which contains within itself an approximation to either of these, whether it be true or false.”²¹

Narrative virtues, as Lucian called them, and their concomitant feelings are evidently necessary for the writing of history. Again and again historians, intellectuals, and novelists have pointed to the connections between historiography on the one hand and art and imagination on the other. In 1821 Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the beacons of the Enlightenment, wrote in one of the fundamental early modern reflections on the nature of historiography:

It may seem questionable to have the field of the historian touch that of the poet at even one point. However, their activities are undeniably related. For if the historian . . . can only reveal the truth of an event by presentation . . . he can do so, like the poet, only through his imagination . . .

An historical presentation, like an artistic presentation, is an imitation of nature. The basis of both is the recognition of the true form, the discovery of the necessary, the elimination of the accidental. We must, therefore, not disdain to apply the more readily recognizable method of the artist

John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2008), reveals the coherence of a long tradition.

²⁰ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, 100, 198–199, and 202. The Latin quotation is from Cicero, *On the Laws* 1.5.

²¹ Cicero, *On Invention* 1.9 and 46; quoted in the translation of Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, 87. The entire context (Woodman, 87–94) is important for the present topic, as are several of the examples from ancient historians Woodman discusses throughout his book.

to an understanding of the more dubious method employed by the historian.²²

Humboldt's reference to imitation of nature returns us to familiar principles of literary composition as developed in antiquity and expressed most famously in Aristotle's *Poetics*. The importance of imagination for historiography, especially imagination of a novelistic kind, has been emphasized frequently. I adduce only two examples. Thomas Babington Macaulay, himself a bestselling narrative and, for want of a better term, poetical historian with *The History of England from the Accession of James II* (1848, five volumes) and *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), wrote in 1828: "A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque." He observed about historical facts:

Facts are the mere dross of history. It is from the abstract truth which interpenetrates them, and lies latent among them like gold in the ore, that the mass [of facts] derives its whole value . . . While our [modern] historians are practicing all the arts of controversy, they miserably neglect the art of narration, the art of interesting the affections and presenting pictures to the imagination.²³

Emphasizing the "resemblance between the historian and the novelist," philosopher R. G. Collingwood quotes Macaulay on the perfect historian but goes even further when he asserts a fundamental aspect that is often overlooked:

this is to underestimate the part played by the historical imagination, which is properly not ornamental but structural. Without it the historian would have no narrative to adorn . . . it is this which, operating not capriciously as fancy but in its *a priori* form, does the entire work of historical construction.²⁴

²² Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task" (no translator credited), *History and Theory*, 6 no. 1 (1967), 57–71; quotations at 58 and 61. "Dubious" here means "subject to doubts and questions."

²³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "History," *The Edinburgh Review* (May, 1828); here quoted from the American edition of Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems*, vol. 1 (1884; rpt. Chicago: Donohue, n. d. [ca. 1889]), 270–309; quotations at 270, 280, and 303. Macaulay's essay, whose first part surveys the major ancient historians, is still fascinating.

²⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed.; ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; rpt. 2005), 245 and 241 (in section entitled "The Historical Imagination"). Collingwood, 243, compares the historian to the detective of mystery fiction who

We may supplement these views with the following observations made in the twentieth-century's fundamental study of the historical novel. Georg Lukács wrote in 1937:

the historical novel presents the writer with a specially strong temptation to try and produce an extensively complete totality. The idea that only such completeness can guarantee historical fidelity is a very persuasive one. But it is a delusion . . . It is clear that the more remote an historical period and the conditions of life of its actors, the more the action must concern itself with bringing these conditions plastically before us, so that we should not regard the particular psychology and ethics which arise from them as an historical curiosity, but should re-experience them as a phase of mankind's development which concerns and moves us.

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel, and act just as they did in historical reality . . .

The historical novel therefore has to *demonstrate* by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way. What in [Sir Walter] Scott has been called very superficially "authenticity of local colour" is in actual fact this artistic demonstration of historical reality.²⁵

Modern historians of antiquity had themselves come to see the affinities of historical accounts to creative literature about the past. In 1874 Theodor Mommsen, one of the most prominent nineteenth-century historians of ancient Rome, went so far as to observe: "The historian has perhaps greater affinity with the artist than with the scholar."²⁶ British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan enlarged on this in an essay called "Clio, a Muse," first published in 1904, revised in 1913, and reprinted in that form in 1930. In it he stated, emphasizing the crucial point by italics:

"constructs an imaginary picture" of what happened. *The Idea of History* was first published in 1946.

²⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1962; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 41–43. As several of his expressions reveal (cf. in particular "plastically before us" and "demonstrate"), Lukács could be writing about visual historical narratives.

²⁶ Theodor Mommsen, "Rede bei Antritt des Rektorates" (1874), quoted from "Rectorial Address," tr. Fritz Stern, in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1973), 192–196; quotation at 193.

The root question can be put in these terms: “Ought history to be merely the accumulation of facts about the past? Or ought it also to be the interpretation of facts about the past? Or, one step farther, ought it to be not merely the accumulation and interpretation of facts, but also the exposition of these facts and opinions *in their full emotional and intellectual value* to a wide public by the difficult art of literature?”

The words in italics raise another question which can be put thus:

“Ought emotion to be excluded from history on the ground that history deals only with the science of cause and effect in human affairs?”

Trevelyan’s answer to these questions entails several pages of discussion. Evidently, his answer to the first part of his “root question” is No. The other answers logically follow from this. More important for us is Trevelyan’s view of the functions of historical writings:

To my mind there are three distinct functions of history, that we may call the *scientific*, the *imaginative* or *speculative*, and the *literary*. First comes what we may call the *scientific*, if we confine the word to this narrow but vital function, the day-labour that every historian must well and truly perform if he is to be a serious member of his profession – the accumulation of facts and the sifting of evidence . . . Then comes the *imaginative* or *speculative*, when he plays with the facts that he has gathered, selects and classifies them, and makes his guesses and generalizations. And last but not least comes the *literary* function, the exposition of the results of science and imagination in a form that will attract and educate our fellow-countrymen. For this last process I use the word “literature,” because I wish to lay greater stress than modern historians are willing to do, both on the difficulty and also on the importance of planning and writing a powerful narrative of historical events.²⁷

Imaginative works of history, that is, works that are primarily artistic and popular rather than strictly scholarly, cannot fulfill all three of Trevelyan’s functions, but they can at least fulfill the latter two. Although Trevelyan is likely to have taken a dim view of the cinema in 1904 or even in 1930, the literary function of historiography fully applies to historical films. This is so because films are visual texts.²⁸ Historical films usually proceed from the use of the scientific function of historians’ works, if often not to the degree many viewers and all historians would

²⁷ Both quotations are from George Macaulay Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, 1930), 140–176; quotations at 142–143 and 160.

²⁸ I refer readers to my other discussions of this in the “Introduction” to Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 3–22, at 18–21, and in *Cinema and Classical Texts*, 22–34, with additional references.

wish for, as the basis for their imaginative reconstruction of the past on the screen and their literary construction of plot, setting, and characters.

Almost a century before Trevelyan a great historian of ancient Rome had expressed a comparable perspective, contrasting the function of the critic of historical evidence whose motto is that of Mr. Gradgrind in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* – “Now, what I want is, Facts” – and that of the true historian. In the preface to the first edition of his *History of Rome* Barthold Georg Niebuhr stated in 1811:

The critic might be content with the excision of fiction, the destruction of fraud: he only seeks to expose a specious history and he is content to advance a few conjectures, leaving the greater part of the whole in ruins. But the historian demands something positive: he must discover at least with some probability the general connectedness of events, and by a more credible story replace that which he has sacrificed to his better judgment. If he omits from his work those investigations which he thought had led him to evoke the spirits of times past, then he must either renounce the use of these results or run the risk of appearing as if he wanted to give out, arrogantly and insolently, as historic truth a mere hypothesis or a questionable possibility – a heavy price to pay for greater elegance in composition.

Some of Niebuhr's terms may remind us of Fielding's perspective and of Aristotle's, Lucian's, or Sidney's. Like creative artists, historians have to construct a meaningful and convincing historical edifice from a state of ruins; only in this way can they do justice to the spirit of an age. There is no irreconcilable difference between historiography and the recreation of history in literature or in images. Concerning the discovery of new historical sources, Niebuhr concludes a little later:

Some restrict themselves to the collection of truncated fragments of reports from antiquity without attempting to solve their underlying riddles . . . Such a lifeless compilation of fragments is of no use; yet only a person who is completely satisfied with such a compilation has a right to criticize the attempt to discover meaning and structure where assuredly these once existed and where they could be discovered through some traces – even if the success of these efforts appears doubtful.²⁹

²⁹ Both passages from B. G. Niebuhr's "Vorrede zu der ersten Ausgabe" of his *Römische Geschichte* in the 1873 edition are taken from the translation in Stern, *The Varieties of History*, 47–50; quotations at 48–49.

Here we may discover a parallel to the standard criticisms leveled at creative engagements with the past: a particular work leaves behind the facts, resorts to invention for the sake of presenting a coherent image of the past, and appears doubtful to every Mr. Gradgrind. “Anything goes!” is obviously not a principle to apply to works of either high or popular art that are worthy of respect; their creators are by no means free to invent or distort as they please. But at least a measure of invention, even at the risk of distortion, is inevitable. Ancient Greek and Roman historians, as we have seen, already knew this.

Historians like Gibbon, famous for his literary qualities, and Mommsen, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature for his multi-volume history of the Roman Republic, fulfill all three of Trevelyan’s functions to an unsurpassable degree. Trevelyan later in the same essay turned to “the perfect genius of Gibbon,” about which he observes: “As all historians should aspire to do, Gibbon united accuracy with art . . . Gibbon had his limitations, though his science and his art were alike perfect of their kind.” It may, however, be more surprising to us to see Trevelyan next discuss someone of whom we do not think at all in connection with Gibbon but chiefly with historical romance fiction:

Gibbon’s cold, classical light was replaced by the rich mediaeval hues of Walter Scott’s stained glass . . . No doubt Scott exaggerated his theme, as all innovators are wont to do. But he did more than any professional historian to make mankind advance towards a true conception of history . . . The great antiquarian and novelist showed historians that history must be living, many-coloured and romantic if it is to be a true mirror of the past.³⁰

Elsewhere Trevelyan is even more emphatic about Scott’s contribution to making history important to large numbers of readers:

Not only did his romances and all that have since been written in imitation of them . . . popularize our study, and enter homes and hearts where no history-book could find its way: I mean more even than that. Scott had a great contribution of his own to make to the interpretation of history, for it was he who first gave the realism and variety of actual life to the records of the past. It was he who first taught us to think of our ancestors as real human beings with passions and absurdities like our own.³¹

³⁰ The quotations are from Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays*, 164–166. A footnote on page 166 is omitted here.

³¹ Trevelyan, “The Present Position of History” (inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University, 1927), in *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays*, 177–196; quotation at 187.

Considerably earlier, Macaulay had already pointed out Scott's importance to historiography:

Sir Walter Scott . . . has used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them in a manner which may well excite their envy. He has constructed out of their gleanings works which, even considered as histories, are scarcely less valuable than theirs. But a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated.³²

Historians today still echo Macaulay, Mommsen, Collingwood, Trevelyan, and many others when they point to the importance of historical imagination, even if they do not mention Sir Walter Scott. But Scott's influence on historical literature and on other kinds of historical recreations on stage and screen cannot be overestimated.³³ His importance to historiography becomes evident from the following observations by a modern historian, even if without reference to him:

Historians are not . . . only concerned to explain the past; they also seek to reconstruct or re-create it – to show how life was experienced as well as how it may be understood – and this requires an imaginative engagement with the mentality and atmosphere of the past . . . historians are time and again confronted by gaps in the evidence which they can make good only by developing a sensitivity as to what might have happened, derived from an imagined picture that has taken shape in the course of becoming immersed in the surviving documentation . . . imagination is vital to the historian.³⁴

Any reader of Gibbon will agree with these words, for Gibbon's imaginative qualities are immediately evident. All historians have and reveal

³² Macaulay, "History," 307, immediately following a description of a painted glass window of Lincoln Cathedral. Trevelyan may have had this passage in mind when he spoke of Scott's "stained glass."

³³ Fundamental to this is the study by James Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," in Gene W. Ruoff (ed.), *The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 237–273. Griffith is D. W. Griffith, whose epic film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) Chandler examines at length. Chandler, 251–252, refers to the dedicatory epistle to *Ivanhoe*, in which Scott "alludes to . . . the task of modernizing in prose the epic tradition he had received in verse. Griffith further modernized, or better, remodernized, the prose epic as it came to him by projecting it into film." On Scott's dedication cf. also Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006), 92.

³⁴ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, rev. 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 2002), 175–176 (in a chapter entitled "The Limits of Historical Knowledge").

feelings of and for history, not least where the historical record shows gaps. So did Gibbon. So did the ancients.

And so do modern novelists. Robert Graves is a case in point. In the Foreword to *Count Belisarius*, his novel about the six-century AD Roman (or Byzantine) general, he writes:

Wherever surviving records are meager I have been obliged to fill in the gaps of the story with fiction, but have usually had a historical equivalent in mind; so that if exactly this or that did not happen, something similar probably did.³⁵

Count Belisarius is an especially instructive case, for in spite of unavoidable liberties with the historical record it expresses and adheres to the spirit of the age in which it is set so convincingly as to suggest to knowledgeable readers that Graves had consulted the great work of J. B. Bury on the history of the later Roman Empire, which had first been published fifteen years before the novel.³⁶ Reading both Bury and Graves shortly after each other (in whichever order) is a revelation: the professional historian and the professional novelist – and amateur historian, translator of Roman authors, and poet – are kindred spirits.

Gibbon's light, however, was not quite as cold as Trevelyan seems to have thought. I have addressed the combination of erudition and feeling in Gibbon in Chapter Eight, so I refrain from repeating or summarizing that context here.³⁷ If Gibbon was "cold, classical" – perhaps we may call this side of his Thucydidean – then he was at the same time Herodotean, shining his light on something in which he believed and doing so with feeling.

We may now reflect on the quandary in which historians find themselves concerning the writing of history in the absence of sufficient documents or other factual records and the implications this has for their work. Connections to Gibbon and Scott, to Mommsen and Trevelyan,

³⁵ Robert Graves, *Count Belisarius* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), vii. The novel was first published in 1938.

³⁶ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1923; several rpts.). Bury was also the most important editor of Gibbon's work (edition published 1896–1900) and was evidently under Gibbon's strong influence, as the very style of Bury's history reveals from its opening sentence on. Bury had already published book-length studies of late Roman history before this definitive work in 1889, 1893, and 1912.

³⁷ Cf. especially W. B. Carnochan, "Gibbon's Feelings," in David Womersley (ed.), *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 333–346. I quote from this essay in the preceding chapter.

and to historical cinema should come readily to readers' minds. Since the subject is rather complex, I quote three scholars at some length, a classicist, a cultural historian, and a film scholar. The first is Woodman, who observes in the conclusion of his book on rhetoric in ancient historiography:

we stand today in relation to the techniques and conventions of the novel, from which those of the visual media are derived, very much as classical historiography once stood in relation to those of epic . . . while it is true that the visual media have entertainment as one of their aims, we have seen ample evidence that the classical historians were expected to provide entertainment for their readers.

The argument which can be brought against [such] parallels, whether ancient or modern, literary or visual, is that they do not come from history at all in our sense of the word. But that, of course, is precisely the point.³⁸

Now the cultural critic. In the chapter "Knowing the Past" of his aptly entitled book *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal observes:

The most pellucid pearls of historical narrative are often found in fiction, long a major component of historical understanding . . . historical novelists . . . declare intentions similar to historians', striving for verisimilitude to help readers feel and know the past . . . The segregation of historical from fictional narrative was a by-product of late-Renaissance concern about the validity and accuracy of historical sources . . . as history retreated to the arid confines of empirical rigour, novelists took over the richer if more fanciful aspects of the past that historians relinquished . . . The historical novel not only made history vivid; it was held a more trustworthy guide to the past . . . The historical novel fulfilled two needs. First, it let readers *feel* the past as formal history could not . . . Second, fiction put readers in the past like people of the time, who could not know what was coming next . . . historical fiction shares with history the burdens of hindsight, not just to make the past intelligible but to account for processes of change not originally apparent.

³⁸ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, 211–212. On entertainment in ancient historiography see Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 120–134 (section entitled "Pleasure"), and Frank W. Walbank, "Profit or Amusement: Some Thoughts on the Motives of Hellenistic Historians," in Herman Verdin, Guido Schepens, and Eugénie de Keyser (eds.), *Purposes of History: Studies in Greek Historiography from the 4th to the 2nd Centuries B.C.* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 253–266, rpt. in Frank W. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome, and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 231–241.

All accounts of the past tell stories about it, and hence are partly invented . . . The history-fiction difference is more one of purpose than of content.³⁹

Thirdly, the cinema scholar:

even if we went to an extreme and reasoned (against experience and practice) that critically authenticated sources were reliably transparent indicators of past existents [*sic*] and states of affairs, one cannot reason with logical security from them to an internally unified historical sequence. The integral form of a complete historical whole does not follow from a citation of some of its elements, *which is the best a historian can do*; therefore, a logical gap between source and conclusion is constitutive of the argumentative field of the modern historian. The historical account must always include not just logically warranted inferences, but inferential jumps . . .

This is why a convincing or powerful historical account can never be based exclusively on primary sources, but must draw on a miscellany of additional resources. These . . . include conceptual assumptions and frameworks . . . for example, contentions about the proper form of a synthetic sequence, which mandates estimates as to the probable composition of missing fragments and the relative pertinences of various surviving fragments; general notions, theories, and ideologies about human or societal causation, and so forth. This suggests that, in making a case for a certain internally unified sequence, the historian must have not only a set of pertinent sources, but also a conceptual or discursive tool kit ready to hand prior to his or her research. Yet, the specifics of the sequence are not supposed to be known in advance of the research . . . Thus, the problem of relating historical parts to a specifically historiographic whole explains why many have found that historiographic reason inevitable leads to some version of the hermeneutic circle: knowledge of the whole depends on certain kinds of piecemeal evidence, but taking that evidence into account requires prior knowledge of the form and contents of the whole.⁴⁰

³⁹ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; rpt. 1995), 224–226 and 229. The entire section, entitled “History, Fiction, and Faction” (224–231), is fundamental to this chapter’s subject and adduces and quotes several important other voices. The title of Lowenthal’s book is a quotation from the opening sentence of British novelist L. P. Hartley’s 1953 novel *The Go-Between*, whose 1971 adaptation by director Joseph Losey from a screenplay by Harold Pinter is one of the most distinguished examples of historical cinema.

⁴⁰ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 118–119. Rosen’s main title is taken from French film scholar André Bazin’s definition of cinema.

All thoughtful historians face a dilemma, one that creative historical storytellers in word or image do not. But they and serious historians alike need facts and imagination. They need a feeling of history and a sense of artistry. A historical novelist, one whom we already encountered, even conjured up two Romans to debate this very issue. In *I, Claudius* Robert Graves has the Augustan historians Livy and Asinius Pollio exchange their opinions about the proper way to write history. Pollio charges Livy: "You credit the Romans of seven centuries ago with impossibly modern motives and habits and speeches. Yes, it's readable all right, but it's not history." Livy counters: "The problem with Pollio is that when he writes history he feels obliged to suppress all his finer, more poetical feelings, and make his characters behave with conscientious dullness . . ." Pollio explains his position:

"Poetry is Poetry, and Oratory is Oratory, and History is History, and you can't mix them."

"Can't I? Indeed I can," said Livy. "Do you mean to say that I mustn't write a history with an epic theme because that's a prerogative of poetry . . .?"

"That is precisely what I do mean. History is a true record of what happened, how people lived and died, what they did and said; an epic theme merely distorts the record . . ." ⁴¹

One question immediately arises. It is not so much "Which of the two is right?" as "Could it be that Pollio's attitude toward writing history caused his work to be lost while Livy's survives?" The answer suggests itself. ⁴²

Hayden White has forcefully restated the positions proposed by Aristotle, Lucian, Sidney, Fielding, and many others from modern theoretical perspectives. His ground-breaking work is too well known to need discussion or quotation here, so I confine myself to one or two observations. The introduction to White's *Metahistory* is entitled "The Poetics of History," in which concepts like *emplotment* and *style* are of particular significance. ⁴³ Two chapters in his essay collection *Tropics of Discourse*

⁴¹ Robert Graves, *I, Claudius: From the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius, Born B. C. X, Murdered and Deified A. D. LIV* (1934; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1961; several rpts.), 108–109.

⁴² Pollio wrote seventeen books of *Histories*; Livy's gigantic (epic?) work was in 142 volumes, of which thirty-five survive complete, many others in epitomes that are all too brief.

⁴³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; several rpts.), 1–42; see especially 7–11 ("Explanation by Emplotment") and 29–31 ("The Problem of Historiographical Styles").

address “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” and “The Fictions of Factual Representation.”⁴⁴ But more significant for our purpose is an essay in which White turned from history to historical film. In 1988 the American Historical Association published a Forum on history and film in its journal. White contributed an essay in which he inquired into “the relative adequacy of what we might call ‘historiophoty’ (the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse) to the criteria of truth and accuracy presumed to govern the professional practice of *historiography* (the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse).”⁴⁵ White’s neologism, although inelegant, is to the point. As he puts it:

Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced.⁴⁶

This may sound shocking to conservative historians of our time. But Simonides, Aristotle, and Horace would not have been surprised, provid-

See further Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; several rpts.), 81–100 and 101–134. Cf. further Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; rpt. 1990).

⁴⁵ Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1193–1199; quotation at 1193. The other contributions are worth considering as well, especially John E. O’Connor, “History in Images / Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” 1200–1209. Cf. further Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17–38. It is not generally known that White’s arguments were anticipated in 1884 by Robert Louis Stevenson, “A Humble Remonstrance,” in *The Travels and Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 13: *Virginibus Puerisque: Memories and Portraits* (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), 344–358. Cf. Stevenson, 346–347: “The art of narrative, in fact, is the same, whether it is applied to the selection and illustration of a real series of events or of an imaginary series . . . it is in every history where events and men, rather than ideas, are presented . . . that the novelist will find many of his own methods most conspicuously and adroitly handled.” See especially Stevenson, 347–350, on truth in history and the novel. The essay begins with a reference to Henry James; Stevenson takes up a position against James’s. More recently Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 164–190 (chapter entitled “General History and the Aesthetic Approach”), made comparable points.

⁴⁶ White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” 1194.

ing they could have known about the technology of moving images. White's conclusion is worth our attention:

Demands for a verisimilitude in film that is impossible in any medium of representation, including that of written history, stem from the confusion of historical individuals with the kinds of "characterization" of them required for discursive purposes, whether in verbal or in visual media.

Even in written history, we are often forced to represent some agents only as "character types," that is, as individuals known only by their general social attributes or by the kinds of actions that their "roles" in a given historical event permitted them to play, rather than as full-blown "characters," individuals with many known attributes, proper names, and a range of known actions that permit us to draw fuller portraits of them than we can draw of their more "anonymous" counterparts. But the agents who form a "crowd" (or any other kind of group) are not more misrepresented in a film for being portrayed by actors than they are in a verbal account of their collective action.⁴⁷

Like other imaginative recreations of the past in word or image, the historical film cannot and should not aspire to the level of accuracy that historians do.⁴⁸ So it is futile to hold it to the same standards and to find it wanting. But historians and artists alike attempt to recreate the past in order to make it meaningful for the present and future. This

⁴⁷ White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," 1198–1199. Marnie Hughes-Warren, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), 187–194 (conclusion entitled "Beyond 'Historiophoty': Film as History"), extends the application of White's term.

⁴⁸ On this topic cf. my "Gladiator and the Traditions of Historical Cinema," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 16–30, especially 16–24 (section called "Film and Historical Authenticity"). Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *History on Film / Film on History*, are fundamental. Cf. also Philip Rosen, "Securing the Historical: Historiography and the Classical Cinema," in Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen (eds.), *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practice* (Frederick: University Publications of America / American Film Institute, 1984), 17–34; Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1210–1227; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "On History and the Cinema," *Screen*, 31 no. 2 (1990), 160–171; Tony Barta, "Screening the Past: History Since the Cinema," in Tony Barta (ed.), *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 1–17; Peter Miskell, "Historians and Film," in Peter Lambert and Phillip Schofield (eds.), *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2004), 245–256; and David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (London: Tauris, 2006). All works cited provide additional references. For a film director's perspective cf. Denys Arcand, "The Historical Film: Actual and Virtual," tr. M. F. Métraux, *Cultures*, 2 no. 1 (1974), 13–26.

circumstance in turn leads us to wider ramifications. Concerning the interpretation of texts from the past, modern hermeneutics as formulated by German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes the reciprocal and mutually inextricable dependence of past and present. This is true for all literary texts, be they fictional, religious, or historical.⁴⁹

How then does a modern author approach the distant past in a work of historical fiction – in our case, the past of classical antiquity? To avoid Jamesian *escamotage* as much as possible, two kinds of procedure are most promising. The one is the pursuit of historical accuracy to the highest possible degree, even if an ideal state of complete authenticity or correctness remains impossible to reach. This is the path taken by, for instance, Mary Renault in her novels about Greek history and historical myth (or mythical history). In a 1979 article entitled “The Fiction of History” Renault stated her goal as follows:

I have never, for any reason, in any historical book of mine, falsified anything deliberately which I knew or believed to be true. Often of course I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past . . . But one can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it; to alter some fact which was central to the life of a real human being, however long it

⁴⁹ For a concise summary see Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), 51–52; for one classical scholar's perspective see Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18–23 (section entitled “Telling Stories about the Past”), with further references. Literature on this topic is extensive, but cf. the following studies: Warner Berthoff, “Fiction, History, Myth: Notes Toward the Discrimination of Narrative Forms,” in Morton W. Bloomfield (ed.), *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 163–287; Louis O. Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” *New Literary History*, 1 (1970), 541–558; Paul Hernadi, “Clio's Cousins: Historiography as Translation, Fiction, and Criticism,” *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), 247–257; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1995), especially 49–75 and 302–311 (notes; chapter entitled “Historical Representations and Truthfulness”). Cf. also Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994; rpt. 1995); G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 46–52 and 76–80 (sections entitled “The Possibility of Historical Truth” and “Imagination,” both in a chapter called “Research”); and Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 17–22. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (rev. ed.; New York: Norton, 1999; rpt. 2000), provides an accessible introduction to the subject of historiography and postmodernism.

is since he ceased to live, in order to make a smoother story, or to exploit him as propaganda for some cause.⁵⁰

Henry James might still think this to be close to humbug, not least because complete accuracy about any given period of history, any event, any person, or any circumstance cannot be achieved. Anachronisms are perhaps the most notorious kind of errors of fact. But historical mistakes can be revealing in a way that many do not generally think about. What a leading Shakespeare scholar wrote about their presence in drama pertains to all historical fiction and emphasizes the close affinities between and among its textual and visual modes:

All Elizabethan plays . . . were designed to offer a comment on the life of the immediate present . . . contemporary references prevented the play from being regarded as the dramatization of "old, unhappy, far-off things" . . . Shakespeare's anachronisms are thus carefully integrated into the scheme of the play.

Anachronism was Shakespeare's chief means of bringing home . . . the immediate reality of his plays . . . Shakespeare, therefore, made use of topical allusions and of ideas that were in the air . . . for the purpose of suggesting the abiding significance of his plays by infusing them with the spirit of the age. The virtual death of tragedy is due to the timid refusal of later poets [in the eighteenth century] to permit such an interpenetration of opposites . . .

The aims of the historian and the artists are different. The historian tries to show us how a past age differs from our own; the poetic dramatist, on the other hand, tries to bring home to us the significance of a past age by relating it to our own, to show that beneath the changes of manners, customs, and institutions the people of a past century are not essentially different from ourselves . . . and above all to make an indirect criticism of the life of our time by writing of similar problems in a different setting.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Mary Renault, "The Fiction of History," *The London Magazine* (1979); here quoted from David Sweetman, *Mary Renault: A Biography* (1993; rpt. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 158. This book contains a few other excerpts from Renault's article and gives valuable insights into her working methods; cf. e.g., Sweetman, 156, 186, and 261–262 (her concern with historical truth and her appreciation of historical novelist Patrick O'Brian's work). Sweetman, 189, quotes from a positive review of one of her novels by classical scholar Moses Hadas ("All of Miss Renault's reconstructions carry conviction because her imagination is informed by careful study"). Sweetman, 303, also quotes a 1983 note to Renault by O'Brian, in which he reports that "the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford" considered her "perfect for historical accuracy, perfect for atmosphere."

⁵¹ Kenneth Muir, "The Dramatic Function of Anachronism," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Literary and Historical Section*, 6 no. 8 (1951), 529–533; quotations at 529 and 531–533. This short essay deserves a rediscovery. The last of the

What readers or audiences are immediately ready to dismiss as a glaring fault – such as a clock in *Julius Caesar* – turns out to be a virtue. Is it possible that what strikes us and struck Henry James as obvious humbug need not always be such after all?

But what about a rather different approach? To avoid errors of fact, an author could turn to the mental life and the emotional world of an ancient figure, as German novelist Hermann Broch did in *The Death of Virgil* and French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar did in *Memoirs of Hadrian*.⁵² We can still hear James's strongest objection: "It's when the extinct soul talks, and the earlier consciousness airs itself, that the pitfalls multiply." But let us look briefly at how Yourcenar avoided these pitfalls. The English translation of her novel contains a series of aphoristic "Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*" that may tell us something worth keeping in mind.⁵³ I quote only a few revealing passages:

Portrait of a voice. If I have chosen to write these *Memoirs of Hadrian* in the first person it is in order to dispense with any intermediary, in so far as possible, even were that intermediary myself . . . what every novelist does is only to interpret, by means of the techniques which his period affords, a certain number of past events; his memories, whether consciously or unconsciously recalled, whether personal or impersonal, are all woven of the same stuff as History itself . . . In our day, when introspection tends to dominate literary forms, the historical novel . . . must take the plunge into time recaptured, and must fully establish itself within some inner world . . .

ellipses in the passages quoted contains Muir's quotation of Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802), that "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (533).

⁵² Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, tr. Jean Starr Untermyer (New York: Pantheon, 1945). The novel's German original was published simultaneously with this translation. Both versions have been reprinted several times. – Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian and Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian*, tr. Grace Frick (1954; rpt. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005).

⁵³ The "Reflections" are in Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* . . . , 317–347; they are preceded by a "Bibliographical Note" (297–315). Cf. also her "Tone and Language in the Historical Novel," in Marguerite Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, tr. Walter Kaiser (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), 25–53, especially 31–37 on *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Yourcenar's novel was dismissed as humbug by P. N. Furbank, "The Time of Her Life," *The New York Review of Books* (October 19, 1995), 49–53. – Equivalent texts by Broch on *The Death of Virgil* appear in the critical and annotated edition of Broch's works and are most easily accessible in the paperback edition of the German text: Hermann Broch, *Der Tod des Vergil*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976; rpt. 1995), 455–505.

The rules of the game: learn everything, read everything, inquire into everything . . . Strive to read a text of the Second Century with the eyes, soul, and feelings of the Second Century . . . take only what is most essential and durable in us, in the emotions aroused by the senses or in the operations of the mind, as our point of contact with those men [of the past].⁵⁴

Viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* may here be reminded of the scene in which Marcus Aurelius holds an inner dialogue with himself and his impending death – the portrait of a voice and its inner world presented both verbally and visually, literally and figuratively, and in this manner affecting us more strongly.

Even if a historical novelist succeeds in creating a convincing portrait of a voice and of a mind, authorial empathy can go only so far, and consciousness of a writer's own time cannot be kept out. A telling instance in which this very circumstance is brought to the fore occurs in Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, which is set at the time of Marcus Aurelius. Its narrator at one point makes the following remark:

That age and our own have much in common – many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives – from Rome, to Paris or London.⁵⁵

A modern editor of Pater's novel comments on this passage and its context:

Marius is not a seamless historical novel, in which the consciousness of Marius himself restricts the range of reference. As the book advances, Pater increasingly feels the need to comment, to draw contemporary inferences . . . References to post-classical culture . . . begin to accumulate as Pater steps back from Marius and frankly draws attention . . . to the similarities between his age and the nineteenth century . . . Part of the book's power comes from the duality of representation . . . And what is not factually true is probably true psychologically.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Quoted from Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* . . . , 329–331. Yourcenar, 330, strikingly observes on the novelist's power over the past: "one can contract the distance between centuries at will" and illustrates this with Hamlet's question: "What's Hecuba to him?" (332). Cf. Yourcenar, 312, on the affinities between history and poetry. Cf. the quotation from Wordsworth in note 49.

⁵⁵ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. Michael Levey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 181 (in chapter entitled "Second Thoughts"). The novel first appeared in 1885.

⁵⁶ Michael Levey, "Introduction" to Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 7–26; quotations at 17–18.

The duality of references spanning past and present is not in itself a fault. After all, the ancients were themselves aware that the two cannot and should not completely be kept separated. As Horace famously put it in a different but more widely applicable context: *mutato nomine de te / fabula narratur*: “If you change the name, the story is about *you*.”⁵⁷ Concerning Marcus Aurelius, the point was made explicitly in the early seventh century, when a Greek writer, possibly the Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocattes, said that the emperor’s *Meditations* would enable readers to see the future, the present, and the past with equal ease.⁵⁸

The preceding part of this chapter is intended to serve as background of my consideration of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in terms of its presentation of a past to which we in the present can respond emotionally and intellectually. We should, however, also keep in mind the wider ramifications inherent in any individual work, whether a verbal or a visual text. What classical scholar Don Fowler said about the first kind could serve as epigraph to this chapter’s second part:

We do not read a text in isolation, but within a matrix of possibilities constituted by earlier texts . . . To read a text thus involves a two-stage process: a reconstruction of the matrix which gives it meaning, and the production of that meaning by the act of relating source- and target-texts . . . The textual system exists before any text, and texts are born always already situated within that system, like it or not . . . Whether the features of past texts are repeated, varied, or denied, they cannot be ignored . . . the opposition of textuality and history is a meaningless one since history is only accessible in discourse. Texts cannot relate to historical events or institutions, whether told by ancients or by moderns.⁵⁹

2. The Feeling of History in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

The last of the 1960s silver-screen Roman epics deals with the moment when the Roman Empire had reached a zenith of power and the height

⁵⁷ Horace, *Satires* 1.1.69–70.

⁵⁸ The poem here paraphrased is a codicil to the last book of the *Meditations* and appears in the Vatican codex of the work and in the *Greek Anthology* (*Anthologia Palatina*) 15.23. Marcus said as much himself at *Meditations* 7.49.

⁵⁹ Don Fowler, “On the Shoulders of Giants: Intertextuality and Classical Studies,” *Materiali e Discussioni*, 39 (1997), 13–34; rpt. in, and here quoted from, Don Fowler, *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115–137; quotations at 117, 119, and 120. Cf. also the important points made at Fowler, 127–128.

of civilization under an emperor who may have come closest to the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king. But does this film, which falsifies history in several ways, still succeed in evoking in the viewer what director Anthony Mann once called a “feeling of history”? Let us recall Mann’s approach to his subject: “we tried to make it all as modern as possible so that it could be related to any society; so that people would understand.”⁶⁰ Mann’s perspective on the importance of history is compatible with that of professional historians. In 1961 Edward Carr, referring to and quoting Benedetto Croce, one of the most influential modern historians, stated in a fundamental study of the nature of history and historiography:

All history is “contemporary history,” declared Croce, meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording? . . . The historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence.⁶¹

Another modern historian specifically links this aspect of historiography to the cinema. Calling film directors who more than occasionally turn to the past for their plots “historians,” Robert Rosenstone observes:

All seem *obsessed and burdened by the past. All keep returning to deal with it by making historical films, not as a simple source of escape or entertainment, but as a way of understanding how the problems and issues that it poses are still alive for us in the present.* Throughout their dramatic films, these directors ask the same kinds of questions of the past that a historian asks – not just what happened or why it happened, but what is the meaning of what happened to us today. Such questions are obviously answered not as an

⁶⁰ Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” *Screen*, 10 no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 54.

⁶¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (1961; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1962; several rpts.), 22 and 28. Carr makes the same point repeatedly; cf. Carr, 29, 35, 142–143, and 164. A leading modern historian of Greece and Rome concurs: Karl Christ, *Von Gibbon zu Rostovtzeff: Leben und Werk führender Althistoriker der Neuzeit*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 6–7. For the passage in question see Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, tr. Douglas Ainslie (1921; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 12. Carr, 22 note 8, quotes Croce at some length. So do I in a cinematic context in “‘Culturally Significant and Not Just Simple Entertainment’: History and the Marketing of *Spartacus*,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 198–232, at 229–230.

academic historian would, but within the possibilities of the dramatic genre and the visual media.⁶²

Although he does not have Anthony Mann in mind, Rosenstone's words can readily be applied to this director, a large percentage of whose *oeuvre* is set in the past. (On this cf. Chapter One.) The apex of Mann's examination of the persistence and perhaps burden of the past came with his epic films.

In the late 1960s historian Will Durant and his wife Ariel took a view of the past that corresponds closely with Mann's. They entitled a chapter of their book *The Lessons of History* "Morals and History" and referred specifically, if without detailed argumentation, to Marcus Aurelius, the decline of Rome, and Gibbon.⁶³ So it is readily understandable, indeed justifiable, that a director working in a popular medium should emphasize that his viewers' emotional involvement in the story they are following must be of greater importance than his debt to the elusive goal of any accurate re-enactment of history. After all, as Mann correctly observed in his essay on the film: "The actual facts, very few people know" – a point already made by Aristotle, as we have seen.

2.1. "Historical Sensation": Will Durant and Anthony Mann

In the preceding chapter I referred to Gibbon as a historian both of rational analysis and strong belief in and indeed feelings for his vast topic. Long after Gibbon, Johan Huizinga, the eminent historian of medieval and early modern Europe, also addressed the subject of what he termed "historical sensation," a variant of Mann's "feeling of history." Taking as his starting point Henri Pirenne's multi-volume study of Belgian history, "a work of a general nature which . . . is considered a model of modern scholarly history," Huizinga posed a number of significant questions and reached an answer worth our consideration. Although the entire discussion – and the essay itself, entitled "The Task of Cultural History" – is important for our topic, I quote only what is directly applicable:

⁶² Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History*, 117–118. On written and cinematic history and related issues see especially Rosenstone, 118, 132–133 ("how do you make the past serious to a large audience . . . in a post-literate age?"), 158 ("film is not history in our traditional sense, but it is a kind of history nonetheless"), and 160–163.

⁶³ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 37–42.

Does Pirenne depict human lives? Hardly at all. Does he describe pageants of a past reality? No. But now comes the difference. Does he call up images? Yes. In reading a work such as this, one does indeed repeatedly have the sense of a direct contact with the past, albeit on a purely scholarly level.

And now comes the core of the question. There is a very important element in historical understanding which might best be indicated by the term "historical sensation." One might also speak of "historical contact." . . . This not completely reduceable contact with the past is an entry into an atmosphere, it is one of the many forms of reaching beyond oneself, of experiencing truth, which are given to man . . . The object of the sensation is not human figures in their individual form, not human lives or human thoughts one thinks one can disentangle . . . an *Ahnung* just as much of roads and houses and fields, of sounds and colors, as of stimulated and stimulating people. This contact with the past . . . lies beyond the book of history, not in it.⁶⁴

Does Mann depict human life? Yes. Does he describe pageants of a past reality? Yes, but of a reality imbued with historical imagination or fantasy. Does he call up images? Yes, but then how could he not? In this regard historical cinema is a legitimate heir to classical rhetoric, as the following passage from Quintilian tells us:

I am to argue a case of murder in court – won't I have everything before my eyes that in the present case is believable to have occurred? Won't the assassin suddenly burst forth from his hiding-place? Won't the victim turn pale with fear? Won't he cry out for help or beg for mercy or try to run away? Won't I see the one striking the blow, the other collapsing? Won't his blood, his pallor, his groans, and the last rattle of his dying breath be imprinted in my mind?⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Johan Huizinga, "The Task of Cultural History," in Johan Huizinga, *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*, tr. James S. Holmes and Hans van Marle (1959; rpt. New York: Harper, 1970; several rpts.), 17–76; quotations at 53–54. The original was first published in 1929. The German word *Ahnung* ("presentiment" – the equivalent of *sensation*) Huizinga takes from Wilhelm von Humboldt, to whom he pays brief tribute in this passage. Huizinga, 54–55, follows the thoughts quoted with short but valuable other considerations, e.g. of the concept of "re-experiencing" the past, with references to Jules Michelet and Hippolyte Taine, who hinted at comparable sentiments. The work Huizinga refers to is Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique* (7 vols.), published in Brussels in several editions between 1900 and 1932. Huizinga is especially concerned with its first two volumes. On Huizinga cf. Kracauer, *History*, 54: "One wonders . . . whether Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* [his most famous book] does not primarily stem from a concern with Beauty that limits the scope of his research by stimulating and guiding it." Cf. Kracauer, 181.

⁶⁵ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 6.2.31; my translation.

A modern scholar comments: “Don’t tell, show!” He observes: “the technique Quintilian describes was of great importance for writers of fiction. Certainly it was not confined to oratory: the examples he goes on to give are from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and we know . . . that historians used it too.”⁶⁶

A work such as *The Fall of the Roman Empire* imparts to attentive viewers the sense of a direct contact with the past, albeit on a non-scholarly level. And the core of the question is still historical sensation, the feeling for the past. Our contact with the past does not come from the book of history, although some of the film and its inspiration come from Gibbon, as I showed in the preceding chapter, but from someone’s belief in the importance of this history. We watch the images of ancient Romans and others and of imperial Rome. The object of our sensation is Roman culture.

On a smaller scale than did Gibbon, Humboldt, and Huizinga, Will Durant, Gibbon’s twentieth-century disciple, exemplifies this side of historiography, one that historians cannot completely suppress. The process by which Durant became involved in the production of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is instructive. Durant, in his and his wife’s autobiography, preserved a record of his journey from instant refusal of having anything to do with this particular instance of historical fiction to his appreciation of what such fiction can be like. Durant’s encounter with Mann was the decisive factor.

It all began for Durant with a telegram in October, 1962, from “two old friends” of Ariel’s at Samuel Bronston’s production company in Madrid, which said in part:

Samuel Bronston Company preparing to shoot remarkable film title the Fall of Rome. This is no ordinary spectacle; enormous definitive film dramatization as conceived by Anthony Mann . . . Mr. Mann, a disciple of yours, voiced a sincere desire to have you associated with film; wishes you write film foreword . . . Mr. Mann willing to fly L.A. to discuss project with you . . .⁶⁷

About a week later Durant received a copy of the script and some other production information from Paul Lazarus, Bronston’s “executive vice-president,” who stated in his cover letter:

⁶⁶ Wiseman, “Lying Historians,” 145–146. The Greek term for this technique is *enargeia*: “the vividness that compels belief” (Wiseman, 145); its Latin equivalents are *illustratio* (literally, “putting [something] into the light”) and *evidentia* (literally, “bringing [something] out to be seen”). Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 6.2.32–36, describes its emotional impact.

⁶⁷ Both quotations are from Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 355.

Mr. Anthony Mann . . . expressed the hope that . . . I might convey to you some of the magnitude and scope of our project . . . I can assure you that the basic promise [*sic*, presumably for “premise”] of our production is borne out by parts of your own “Caesar and Christ,” which Mr. Mann and others in our organization have read with the greatest of interest . . .

We would hope that you would consider the possibility of allowing us to utilize your services as consultant. We would also like to weigh with you the possibility of your writing a prologue for our film.⁶⁸

Durant read the script with the predictable reaction: “It was brilliantly done, and dramatically effective, but it took so many liberties with history that I felt that I had better withdraw from any connection with the film.” In early November he wrote a letter to Lazarus to that effect:

I have read nearly every word of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, and I have given much thought to your letter . . . I hasten to send you my conclusions . . . I recognize that a motion picture, like even the best historical novels, must, for dramatic purposes, and for wide public reception, take some liberties with history. I am afraid that some of the divergences will meet with criticism.⁶⁹

Durant specifies three such divergences: those involving Commodus (his “character and reign . . . were comparatively minor factors in the fall of Rome”; Durant provided a separate list of major factors), Lucilla (“a rather loose lady”; Durant quotes Gibbon on her life and death), and the manner of Commodus’ death. He concludes his letter by informing Lazarus about his decision not to get involved, but he adds a helpful suggestion:

I take it for granted that Mr. [Philip] Yordan has sought to reduce the fictitious elements in his script to a minimum consistent with commercial viability. But it would be unwise for me to lend my name to the production in any way. I must remain an anonymous friend, and I am sure that I can rely on you and your associates to respect my reluctant decision. Purely as an anonymous friend I have sketched the enclosed “Prologue” both as a possible introduction to the picture and as an attempt, in its final paragraph, to disarm the critics by making some apologies to history. You are welcome to use part or all of this Prologue, but do not ascribe it to me.⁷⁰

This looks like a dead end for both sides. It also appears in retrospect that Durant was being a little disingenuous about his anonymity, because the

⁶⁸ Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography*, 355.

⁶⁹ Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography*, 355–356.

⁷⁰ Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography*, 356.

text he composed for the Prologue came directly from *Caesar and Christ*, something he cannot very well have expected to go altogether unnoticed.⁷¹ But the excerpts from his letter to Lazarus that Durant cites in his autobiography are immediately followed by this paragraph, here given in its entirety – not only because it reports why Durant changed his mind but also, and equally importantly, because it throws a rare and revealing light on director Mann:

My desire to remain uncommitted was shaken the moment Ariel led Anthony Mann into my study in Los Angeles. I had imagined motion picture directors to be tough dictators as ready as Newton to give laws to stars. But here was a gentleman – of fine figure, handsome face, open countenance, modest manners, courteous speech, and artless but ensnaring charm. He had brought with him his copy of *Caesar and Christ*; his knowledge of the book softened me. Everything would be done, he assured us, to bridge the gap between Yordan's script and historic fact; but I should remember that [Yordan] had been commissioned not to write history but to fashion a play capable of holding, through three hours, the attention of millions of auditors. I promised to reconsider.⁷²

So he did. Mann's charm was not quite as artless as Durant may have thought – bringing *Caesar and Christ* was certainly a good move. So was Mann's assurance of greater historical accuracy, an assurance impossible to implement. Still, Durant's impression of Mann and his witty pun on the two meanings of "star" tell us that this must have been a meeting of true minds.

In May 1963, the Durants arrived in Madrid. True to the historian's calling, Durant gave Mann his list of the causes of the fall of the Western Roman Empire at their first dinner together. Shortly afterwards he informed Bronston "that his majestic enterprise might be faulted for its historical license; he assured me that he would do his best to reconcile the play with history" – an assurance as unrealistic as Mann's. Surrounded and seduced by the lavish comfort that Bronston customarily provided for visiting celebrities and dignitaries, Durant was now learning his first lesson about historical filmmaking:

I had seen the costly realistic reproduction of the Roman Forum as setting for part of the picture, and had witnessed Sophia Loren and Stephen Boyd

⁷¹ I discuss the Prologue and the Epilogue in Chapter Eight. Cf. further Durant's contributions to the film's American program book, reprinted in the present volume, and my introductory editorial note on them.

⁷² Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography*, 356. Here and on the preceding page Durant erroneously calls Yordan "Paul," presumably because of Lazarus's first name.

laboring to present the love story that was to relieve the scenes of war. I realized that it was too late to alter the script except in minor detail; and Ariel and I, softened by almost imperial luxury, adjusted ourselves to making the best of a delightful experience.⁷³

That Durant was impressed by the set of the Roman Forum is immediately understandable, and it is likely that he took pride in being photographed there, impeccably tailored and holding a copy of *Caesar and Christ*. A color photo of Durant in the Forum accompanies his Prologue in the film's American program book. The narrator of "Rome in Madrid," a promotional featurette on the making of the film, introduces Durant to viewers in a manner intended to impress: "Philosopher-historian Doctor Will Durant . . . moved to Madrid as a consultant on the vast project."⁷⁴ Durant is first seen at his typewriter, an obviously posed scene. Soon after, he appears to be in close consultation with Mann, who is holding a book that looks like *Caesar and Christ* in his hands. This, too, seems to be a posed scene.

2.2. Verbal and Visual Expressions of Historical Sensation

In Chapter Eight I addressed the subject of Mann's "feeling of history" in connection with Gibbon and discussed the speech that the film's Marcus Aurelius delivers to the assembled leaders of the empire. Here I return to this speech, if without quoting from it, in order to place it into the context of the Romans' own thoughts and beliefs. The speech fully accords with the loftier views of Rome that have been preserved from before the birth of its empire. Cicero, the late-republican statesman and orator, had memorably observed:

I think that . . . all inhabitants of towns [in Italy] have two fatherlands, one by nature, one by citizenship. For example, Cato [the Elder], although born at Tusculum, was adopted by the city of the Roman people, and so, even if by birth from Tusculum, he was by citizenship a Roman and belonged to the one home by place of birth, the other by law . . . so we call both those places our home: the one where we were born and the one that adopted us. But that one must be dearest to us which has given the name of republic to the entire commonwealth, for which we must be ready to die, to which we must dedicate ourselves completely, and to which we

⁷³ This and the preceding quotation are from Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography*, 357.

⁷⁴ "Rome in Madrid" is now available as part of the DVD edition of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Its narrator is James Mason, one of the film's stars.

must consecrate all our endeavors. For the one that bore us is just as dear to us as the one that adopted us . . . [Everybody] has two fatherlands but considers them one and the same.⁷⁵

The historical Marcus Aurelius was to take up the same perspective in his *Meditations*. For him as an individual his city is Rome; as a human being, it is the world. And the world in turn is like a state or a city.⁷⁶

In his second speech against Verres, the corrupt governor of Sicily, Cicero reminded the senators in 70 BC of the political wisdom with which the Romans had treated the island's communities when Sicily had become part of the republic.⁷⁷ He emphasizes friendship and mutual trust, terms that carried greater political implications than we understand them to possess today, in the relations between the Romans and the Sicilian communities. Cicero observes that the latter preserved their prior legal status and accepted Roman rule under unchanged conditions. Only very few cities had to be subdued by force of arms, and even these received their lands back from their conquerors. The historical case of Sicily comes close to showing us an example of what the film's fictionalized emperor has in mind regarding human frontiers. Four years later, in his first speech as a Roman magistrate, Cicero again referred to the effect that the moderation of Roman statesmen used to have on foreign nations, an effect that since then had largely been lost until it reappeared with Pompey: "Now they understand that their ancestors, at a time when we had public officials of such self-restraint, had every reason to prefer serving the Roman people to ruling over others."⁷⁸ Such service implies their near equality to the Romans.

During the reign of Emperor Augustus the historian Livy similarly referred to the great examples of Roman ancestors in comparable situations. I mention only two. Camillus, one of the greatest heroes of earliest Roman republican history and legend, victorious general and multiple triumphant, was honored as Second Founder of Rome.⁷⁹ Early in the fourth century BC he is said to have advised the senators about the best way to govern Latium, the region surrounding Rome, after their decisive

⁷⁵ Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.5; my translation.

⁷⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.44 and 4.3.2; cf. 3.11.2. On the idea of the world-city in the *Meditations*, derived from Posidonius, cf. Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), 222–223.

⁷⁷ Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.3.12–13.

⁷⁸ Cicero, *On the Manilian Law* 41; my translation. The speech was in favor of the senate's appointment of Pompey as supreme commander against Mithridates and Tigranes. Cicero succeeded.

⁷⁹ Livy, *From the Foundation of the City* 7.1.10.

victories. To avoid renewed wars they should find ways to pacify the conquered peoples forever. They could either utterly destroy them or, forgetting past enmities, accept them into their own community in accordance with their ancestors' custom. "Certainly," Camillus says, "by far the most secure power is that in which those rejoice who obey it."⁸⁰ Later history was to prove Camillus right. In the Second Punic War even Hannibal's ferocious devastation of large parts of Italy did not move the cities allied with Rome to go over to the enemy. As Livy reports, "they were obviously ruled with just and moderate power and did not refuse to obey the better side, which is the only bond of mutual trust."⁸¹

Our most important source to throw historical light on the speech of the film's Marcus Aurelius, however, dates to the very time of the Antonines. The Greek orator Aelius Aristides, one of the most learned men of his era, visited Rome for the second time in 155 and delivered a famous eulogy on the city and its empire before the imperial court. His fulsome rhetoric is apt to make him appear insincere to us, but there is no reason to doubt that Aristides meant what he said.⁸² Some of his points accord

⁸⁰ Livy, *From the Foundation of the City* 8.13; my translation. The alternative, in Camillus' words (*vastas inde solitudines facere*: "to make vast deserts" of desolation) anticipates the verdict by the British chieftain Calgacus on Roman destructiveness as reported in Tacitus, *Agricola* 30: *ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant*: "where they make a desert they call it peace."

⁸¹ Livy, *From the Foundation of the City* 22.13.11; my translation. Cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 13.56.1 (the words of Dubius Avitus, governor of Lower Germany, to the Ampsivari in AD 58).

⁸² Cf. E. T. Salmon, *The Nemesis of Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 47–48. In general cf. Gibbon's comments on rhetorical flamboyance in imperial Roman letters: "Whatever suspicions may be suggested by the air of rhetoric and declamation, which seems to prevail in these passages, the substance of them is perfectly agreeable to historic truth" (*HDF* 1, 65); Gibbon names Pliny the Younger, Aelius Aristides, and Tertullian in a note preceding the sentence quoted. (As in the preceding chapter, I cite Gibbon according to the 1993 Everyman's Library edition by abbreviated title, volume number, and page reference.) Cf. further the *Plea for Christians* by the Christian philosopher Athenagoras of Athens, addressed to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus c. AD 176–180, about which its modern editor has observed: "He [Athenagoras] occupies a position surprisingly close to that of the pagan rhetorician Aelius Aristides – with the obvious difference that whereas Aristides has nothing but praise for Rome, Athenagoras is forced to regard the harassment of Christians as an atypical aberration in Roman religious policy . . . Athenagoras provides a picture that is as striking in its idealization of Roman power as that provided by Aristides in his famous oration on the empire." Quoted from William R. Schoedel, "Christian 'Atheism' and the Peace of the Roman Empire," *Church History*, 42 (1973), 309–319; quotations at 309 and 317. Athenagoras' *Plea* is best accessible, in the original and in translation, in Athenagoras, *Legatio and De Resurrectione*, ed. and tr. William R. Schoedel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 2–87.

well with Mann's view of Rome. Aristides tells the Romans about the greatness of their world:

Although your empire is so large and so great, it is much greater in its good order than in its circumference . . . And there has arisen a single harmonious government which has embraced all men; and that which formerly seemed impossible to happen has been combined under you, the great and real power of empire and of generosity . . . Indeed, you best have proved that well-known saying, that the earth is the mother of all and the universal country of all . . . And what was said by Homer, "The earth was common to all", you have made a reality, by surveying the whole inhabited world, by bridging the rivers in various ways, by cutting carriage roads through the mountains, by filling desert places with post stations, and by civilizing everything with your way of life and good order.⁸³

Aristides had already singled out for special admiration and gratitude a circumstance that endears the Romans to everybody of his time:

Although you hold so great an empire and rule with such authority and power, you have also proved most successful in that quality which is in every way peculiar to you. For you are the only ones ever to rule over free men.⁸⁴

He also praises the ideal of Roman citizenship in resounding but accurate terms:

But the following is by far most worthy of consideration and admiration in your government, the magnanimity of your conception, since there is nothing at all like it. For you have divided into two parts all the men in your empire – with this expression I have indicated the whole inhabited world – and everywhere you have made citizens all those who are the more accomplished, noble, and powerful people, even if they retain their native affinities, while the remainder you have made subjects and the governed . . . But all lies open to all men . . . there has been established a common democracy of the world . . . and you have caused the word

⁸³ Aelius Aristides, "Regarding Rome" (*Oration 26*), 29, 66, and 100–101; quoted from P. Aelius Aristides, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2: *Orations XVII–LIII*, tr. Charles A. Behr (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 73–97 and 373–379 (notes), here 79, 87, and 95. The Homer quotation is at *Iliad* 15.193. Behr, 373 note 1, decides against the speech's earlier date of 144. James H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power: A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (Philadelphia: The American Philological Society, 1953), gives a detailed analysis of this speech.

⁸⁴ Aristides, "Regarding Rome" 34 and 36 (Behr, 80).

“Roman” to belong not to a city, but to be the name of a sort of common race, and this not one out of all the races, but a balance to all the remaining ones.⁸⁵

Aelius naturally lauds the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, as well:

It is no longer even believed that wars ever took place, but most men hear of them like idle myths. Even if somewhere on the border clashes should occur, as is likely to happen in an immeasurably great empire, . . . indeed these wars and the discussions about them have quickly passed away like myths. Such great peace do you have, even if war is native to you!⁸⁶

Aelius has much to say about the Romans' civilizing influence on the world, as indicated in particular by the cultural and social advances that the cities of the empire enjoy and exhibit as signs of true civilization: “Indeed, the cities shine with radiance and grace.”⁸⁷ One might think, he says near his conclusion, that “before your empire everything was in confusion, topsy-turvy, and completely disorganized.” With Rome came “universal order,” laws common to all, and religion, all signs of stability. The result is “total security, universal and clear to all.”⁸⁸

So, to a remarkable degree, Marcus Aurelius' oration in Mann's film reveals the spirit in which Aelius spoke about Rome. It also echoes that of Emperor Claudius in AD 48, in which Claudius had addressed the Roman senate on the traditional policy of integration, which had made Rome great since its earliest days:

The experience[s] of my own ancestors . . . encourage me to adopt the same national policy, by bringing excellence to Rome from whatever source . . . [Italy] unit[ed] not merely individuals but whole territories and peoples under the name of Rome . . . our next step was to make citizens of the finest provincials too: we added them to our ex-soldiers in settlements throughout the world, and by their means reinvigorated the exhausted empire. This helped to stabilize peace within the frontiers and successful

⁸⁵ Aristides, “Regarding Rome” 59–60 and 63 (Behr, 85–86). Behr, 376 note 66, refers to additional ancient passages on the greatness of Roman citizenship.

⁸⁶ Aristides, “Regarding Rome” 70–71 (Behr, 88). Cf. Aristides, 64–65, on the Romans' lack of need of fortified garrisons in their cities to secure their power. When Aristides, 79–81, discusses walls, he comes close to expressing what Marcus Aurelius calls “human frontiers” in the film. This, of course, does not negate the Romans' military might; cf. Aristides, 82–84.

⁸⁷ See especially Aristides, “Regarding Rome” 92–99; quotation at 99 (Behr, 95).

⁸⁸ Aristides, “Regarding Rome” 102–104 (Behr, 96).

relations with foreign powers . . . Their descendants are with us; and they love Rome as much as we do.⁸⁹

The greatness of Rome received another resounding tribute a little over two centuries after the death of Marcus Aurelius. Although political, military, and social circumstances had significantly changed, the late Roman poet Claudian echoed the views and sentiments of Aelius Aristides to a remarkable degree when he wrote an epic in three books on Roman general Flavius Stilicho's elevation to the consulship in 400. Stilicho had defended the empire against the Visigoths for about twenty years and had become commander-in-chief of the Roman armies in 395 after the death of Emperor Theodosius I. To emphasize Stilicho's greatness, Claudian turns to a ringing encomium of the city which Stilicho has been and still is protecting.⁹⁰ This city is identical with the world, as it had been to Marcus Aurelius. Her elegance (*decus*) surpasses description. She was the "cradle of law," and like a mother, not an empress, she took to her bosom all the conquered peoples, now united under one common name. She imparted Roman citizenship to them all, and mankind is indebted to her "peaceful character" (*pacifici mores*). As a result, "we are now all one people." Even if we allow for some rhetorical exaggeration, Claudian expresses the feeling of Roman culture at its greatest.⁹¹ This is the feeling we get from *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

⁸⁹ Tacitus, *Annals* 11.24, quoted from Michael Grant, *Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 243–244. Claude Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome*, tr. P. S. Falla (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 17–47 and 401–403 (references), and, more briefly, Karl Galinsky, *Classical and Modern Interactions: Postmodern Architecture, Multiculturalism, Decline, and Other Issues* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 65, outline the process of foreign and barbarian assimilation through the granting of Roman citizenship. Nicolet aptly characterizes "the 'natural patria' of which Cicero speaks" and "the national or imperial patria embodied in Rome" (46) as "a citizenship at two levels" (47). Cf. also Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Rise and Fall of States According to Greek Authors* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 80–82, who adduces speeches comparable to Claudius' in Dionysus of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 3.29: by the king of Alba) and Livy (*From the Foundation of the City* 4.3–5: by Canuleius). On Claudius' speech, preserved in a different version on a bronze tablet found at Lyons, see Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 100–101, and Miriam T. Griffin, "The Lyons Tablet and Tacitean Hindsight," *The Classical Quarterly*, 32 (1982), 404–418.

⁹⁰ The following description is a summary of Claudian, *On the Consulship of Stilicho* 3.130–173.

⁹¹ Cf. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire . . .*, vol. 1, 136, on these lines: "a passage which deserves a place among the great passages of Latin literature . . . He has expressed with memorable eloquence the Imperial ideal of the Roman State."

After these verbal analogies I now turn to the film's feeling of history in visual terms by examining a specific part of its architectural setting which expresses – or rather, adheres to – historical sensation more than we may at first sight be prepared to believe.

The greatness of Rome recreated on the screen finds its most beautiful expression in the sets of imperial palaces, temples, and the Roman Forum, the empire's center and “history's largest page,” as it has been called.⁹² Mann's film is famous for its highly accurate reconstruction of palaces and temples in the heart of the city.⁹³ Its Forum Romanum was the most magnificent and the largest outdoor set ever built until that time. Proof is unavailable, but it is likely that for the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, the Forum, and the imperial palaces John Moore and Veniero Colasanti, the film's set designers, followed Giuseppe Gatteschi's lavish 1924 book of plates that juxtaposes reconstructions of Roman architecture with photographs of their current state.⁹⁴ They may also have consulted drawings of Roman ruins and their reconstructions made by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architects.⁹⁵ A black-and-white photograph of the Forum set appeared a year after the film's release in *Imperial Rome*, a volume in the popular *Time-Life* book series *Great Ages of Man*; its main author was well-known classical scholar Moses Hadas of Columbia University.⁹⁶ This photo is the only image of a modern reconstruction in the entire book, and its inclusion attests to the set's authenticity. Moore and

⁹² On the phrase and its implications see especially William Vance, *America's Rome*, vol. 1: *Classical Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1–42, discussing the impact of the Roman Forum on the American imagination.

⁹³ On the architecture in Mann's film and its accuracy cf. the comments by Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywood's Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), 271–282, in connection with Commodus' triumphal procession through the city. “Rome in Madrid” includes several brief scenes about the construction of the Forum set and juxtaposes shots of some of the actual ruins with their recreations.

⁹⁴ Giuseppe Gatteschi, *Restauri della Roma imperiale con gli stati attuali ed il testo spiegativo* (Rome: Comitato di azione patriottica, 1924).

⁹⁵ On these see, e.g., Georges Seure and H. d'Espouy, *Monuments antiques, relevés et restaurés par les architectes pensionnaires de l'Académie de France à Rome*, vol. 2: *Monuments antiques de Rome* (Paris: Massin, 1911), and Paola Ciancio Rossetto, Giuseppina Pisani Sartorio, and François-Charles Uginet (eds.), *Roma antiqua: 'Envois' degli architetti francesi 1786–1901: Grandi edifici pubblici* (exhibition catalogue; Rome: Edizioni Carte segrete, 1992). For a more recent publication and additional references see Roberto Cassanelli, Massimiliano David, Emidio de Albertis, and Annie Jacques, *Ruins of Ancient Rome: The Drawings of French Architects Who Won the Prix de Rome 1786–1924*, tr. Thomas M. Hartmann (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2002).

⁹⁶ Moses Hadas (and the editors of Time-Life Books), *Imperial Rome* (New York: Time, 1965), 72–73.

Colasanti had a high reputation for careful and accurate reconstructions of historical sets.⁹⁷

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* people were also interested in this set. A representative from their film division approached Bronston's Paul Lazarus about making educational shorts on Roman history and culture for American classrooms, to be filmed on the Forum and other sets and with footage from Mann's film intercut at appropriate moments. The result were three such films: "Life in Ancient Rome," "Julius Caesar: The Rise of the Roman Empire," and "Claudius: Boy of Ancient Rome," which had a combined running time of a little under one hour. These films, too, had a scholar as adviser or rather "Collaborator," as his screen credits call him: Professor John Eadie of the University of Michigan. But this did not save them from errors.⁹⁸ Nevertheless these films remain eloquent tributes to the appeal of Moore and Colasanti's Forum.

To use a famous phrase of Gibbon's in a literal rather than in a figurative sense, Mann's film shows us "the stupendous fabric" (*HDF* 4, 119) of Roman architecture as a visual sign of Rome's power and greatness. What art historian William McDonald has said about the *Domus Augustana*, Emperor Domitian's residence and, with Nero's Golden House, the most gigantic and luxurious of all imperial palaces, describes the political function of Roman imperial architecture in general and applies to that in Mann's film: the imperial palace was "an architectural incarnation of majesty. The interiors were designed for the same purpose . . . to create a tangible rhetoric of power, a panegyric in architecture."⁹⁹ The sections

⁹⁷ Cf. Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 85–86, and historian, screenwriter, and historical novelist Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (1995; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1996), 303: "The only 'accurate' Roman film that I've ever seen – in appearance, that is – was *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* . . . with a great set designer, who knew what the city had looked like at the time of Marcus Aurelius." Vidal's Gibbonian error concerning the film's title is telling.

⁹⁸ The most noteworthy one occurs in the second film. We see Caesar on his campaign looking over scrolls whose Latin texts are to represent his *Gallic Wars*. Our off-screen narrator characterizes these as "clear, concise . . . descriptions" of Caesar's campaigns, but the one phrase longest on the screen is nothing of the sort. Spelling and grammar are off. Most miraculously Caesar quotes Horace: *Horatius scribit dulce esse pro patria – si . . .*. The incomplete and slightly changed quotation is part of one of the most famous lines in all of Roman literature: "Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country" (Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13). The first three books of Horace's *Odes* were published in 23 BC, almost three decades after the end of Caesar's campaigns in Gaul and more than two after his assassination. – All three films are now accessible in the Limited Collector's Edition of the DVD of Mann's film.

⁹⁹ William L. McDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1: *An Introductory Study*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 71. Cf. McDonald, 167, on Roman vaulted architecture as symbol of a unified empire. McDonald, 179–183 ("Imperial

on Roman monuments and their public uses in Gibbon's Chapter II (*HDF* 1, 51 and 54–55) are verbal equivalents of what Mann and his architects translated into images. They rebuilt some of “the majestic ruins” (*HDF* 1, 51), among them the Temple of *IVPPITER OPTIMVS MAXIMVS* (“Jupiter, Best and Greatest,” the Romans' chief guardian) on the Capitol, the very building that had inspired Gibbon's work. No other reconstruction of it has ever looked this majestic. Historians and archaeologists, however, can only speculate about the temple's original appearance since little specific information from ancient sources has survived.¹⁰⁰ But this imposing marble structure may have resembled that of the Temple of Apollo dedicated by Emperor Augustus in 28 BC, with its gleaming white front and, in Virgil's words, “snow-white threshold of radiant Phoebus.”¹⁰¹ Marble, in fact, was of double significance: “The architectural ornament was predominantly of marble. Marble decoration had a particular association with imperial power.”¹⁰² Equally important was its significance as the Romans' means of expressing religious feelings.¹⁰³

Civilization and Architecture”), summarizes the meaning of imperial architecture and its function as “a mimesis of the state” (181). Cf. Edmund Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire: Architecture in the Antonine Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53–54 (in chapter entitled “The Symbolic Significance of Architectural Form”). On Domitian's palace and imperial self-presentation see Paul Zanker, “Domitians Palast auf dem Palatin als Monument kaiserlicher Selbstdarstellung,” in Adolf Hoffmann and Ulrike Wulf (eds.), *Die Kaiserpaläste auf dem Palatin in Rom: Das Zentrum der römischen Welt und seine Bauten*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 86–99 and 182–183 (notes). Cf. the praise lavished on this palace in cosmic and divine terms by Statius, *Silvae* 4.2.

¹⁰⁰ On the temple cf. Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 3.2.5, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 4.61. See further Samuel Ball Platner, *The Topography and Monuments of Ancient Rome*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1911), 297–299; Theodor Kissel, *Das Forum Romanum: Leben im Herzen der Stadt* (Düsseldorf: Artemis and Winkler, 2004), 55–58; and Filippo Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, tr. James J. Clauss and Daniel P. Harmon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 32–34. John W. Stamper, *The Architecture of Roman Temples: The Republic to the Middle Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), discusses the temple prominently throughout his book, especially its early stages, its rebuilding and reconstruction, and its architectural and political contexts. For images of reconstruction see Peter Connolly and Hazel Dodge, *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; rpt. 2000), 170, and Stephen Biesty and Andrew Solway, *Rome in Spectacular Cross-Section* (Oxford: Oxford University Press / New York: Scholastic Press, 2003), 14–15.

¹⁰¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.720; my translation. The temple of Jupiter the Thunderer (*Iuppiter Tonans*) near that of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus may have rivaled the latter in its imposing appearance. Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 36.50, and Suetonius, *Augustus* 91.2.

¹⁰² Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire*, 159.

¹⁰³ On this cf. Karl-Wilhelm Weeber, *Luxus im alten Rom: Die öffentliche Pracht* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2006), 144–146 (in a chapter about marble).

Pietas, a sense of religious duty, was one of their chief virtues. The city of Rome in Mann's film is what General Maximus decades later will say to the Marcus Aurelius of Ridley Scott's loose remake: "Rome is the light." In *Gladiator* Rome is anything but the light: virtually nothing bright and beautiful is in sight, the outdoors are dark and cloudy, the interiors murky, and the architectural landmark that literally and symbolically dominates the portrayal of Rome in this film is the Colosseum, a place of violent death. The Forum is nowhere in sight. Maximus is in the wrong film.

Corroboration of how carefully the statue of Jupiter in his temple was reconstructed for *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is found in Gatteschi's book.¹⁰⁴ It appears that Colasanti and Moore took Gatteschi's plate showing the seated god as their direct model, for the similarity between the book's image and the statue they built in the studio, while not absolute, is almost uncanny. Colasanti and Moore even risk an incorrect first impression which readers or viewers of the book unfamiliar with Roman cult may easily have received: that the temple housed a statue of Jupiter only. But it had two additional niches (*cellae*) on either side of Jupiter's, dedicated to Juno, his sister and wife, and to Minerva, his favorite daughter. All three formed the Capitoline Triad, the official protectors and guardians of the Roman people. Gatteschi's plate of the temple's interior does not show either of the statues that flanked Jupiter's. So it is a sign of the extent of their care and dedication that Colasanti and Moore nevertheless incorporated at least one of the side *cellae* into their reconstruction, if on a scale smaller than the originals. In two shots toward the end of the film what appears to be a statue of Minerva in the *cella* to Jupiter's right is very briefly visible on the left side of the screen. The more the pity, then, that Moore and Colasanti had to put a fig leaf on one of the marble statues placed along the sides of the approach to Jupiter's colossal statue – an unavoidable circumstance given modern sensibilities and the demands on a film that could not afford to jeopardize its chances of reaching family audiences.

The Temple of Jupiter almost becomes the filmmakers' tribute to Gibbon, to whom the ruins of Rome "would be sufficient to prove that those countries [Italy and the provinces] were once the seat of a polite and powerful empire. Their greatness alone, or their beauty, might deserve our attention" (*HDF* 1, 51). The film restores the ruins' greatness and beauty and exemplifies the point Gibbon made about the connections of "the agreeable history of the arts with the more useful history of

¹⁰⁴ Gatteschi, *Restauro della Roma imperiale*, 5.

human manners" (*HDF* 1, 51). But architectural history is more than a handmaid to history, as Gibbon himself stated a little later in a comment on Roman republican architecture: "the sovereignty of the people was represented in the majestic edifices destined to the public use; nor was this republican spirit totally extinguished by the introduction of wealth and monarchy" (*HDF* 1, 54).¹⁰⁵ So the Rome of white marble in Mann's film parallels *aurea Roma*, the "golden Rome" of the Augustan poets.¹⁰⁶ It comes close to being what Horace had called *beata Roma*: a Rome rich and blessed.¹⁰⁷ Its outer appearance conveys its inner greatness, not only as a city but also and more importantly as a civilization.¹⁰⁸ A modern architectural historian has observed about Roman architecture at the height of the empire: "To contemporaries the buildings of the Roman imperial period were as memorable as those of the past. They stood the supreme test of moral excellence, comparison with the works of the golden age of classical Athens."¹⁰⁹ The fate which Jupiter's statue has to suffer in the film is representative of this: Commodus, a megalomaniac declared a god by a shamelessly sycophantic senate, replaces Jupiter's head with his own. Mann does not make a big point of this; instead, in a way indicative of his trust in his viewers' attentiveness and intelligence, he shows us the result only when, toward the end of the film, Livius meets Commodus in the temple. As before, we see the statue in

¹⁰⁵ On the influence of ancient art on Gibbon cf. Francis Haskell, "Gibbon and the History of Art," in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive, and Stephen R. Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 193–205.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Ovid, *The Art of Love* 3.113: *nunc aurea Roma est* ("now Rome is golden"), and Virgil, *Georgics* 2.534: *rerum . . . pulcherrima Roma* ("most beautiful of all things, Rome"). Propertius, *Elegies* 2.31.1 and 9, uses the words "golden" for the portico of Augustus' Apollo temple and "shining" for its marble; cf. Propertius 4.1.5: *haec aurea templa* ("these golden temples"). Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3, observes that Augustus' extensive marble decorations beautified Rome "in a manner appropriate to the majesty of the empire" (*pro maiestate imperii*). In the fourth century AD Ausonius began his *Ordo urbium nobilium* ("Order of Famous Cities"), a series of poetic eulogies of twenty ancient cities, with a one-line praise of Rome that said it all: *Prima urbes inter, divum domus, aurea Roma* ("First among cities, the gods' home: golden Rome"). For comparable examples see Wilhelm Gernentz, *Laudes Romae* (Rostock: Adler, 1918), 58–59. In general cf. Serena Ensoli and Eugenio La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma: Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana* (Rome: "L'Herma" di Bretschneider, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ Horace, *Odes* 3.29.11–12: *beatae . . . Romae*. Horace, however, contrasts the peaceful country to the boisterous city and prefers the former.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. the heading "Beata Urbs" that Walter Pater gave Chapter XVII in the third edition (1892) of *Marius the Epicurean*. He took it from Horace, to whom he alludes in this brief chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire*, 203.

long shots, but now the head of the god is lying on the temple floor in the foreground, screen left. The broken head anticipates the film's final drawing of *THE END* as discussed in the preceding chapter. Commodus' desecration of Jupiter is unhistorical, but it makes a clever point. And there may have been a historical analogy for it. Although evidence is insufficient and the matter controversial, many scholars have long believed that Nero, Rome's most famous imperial megalomaniac, had his own head put on a colossal statue of the Sun God.¹¹⁰

Attentive and emotionally involved viewers – all those with a feeling for history – leave Mann's film with a feeling of sadness. The beauty and greatness of Rome as civilization more than as empire that the film had shown in various ways, most importantly in Marcus Aurelius as its humane and liberal ideal, in the stupendous architecture of the Roman Forum and the imperial palaces, in the old senator's speech with its ancient and modern echoes, and in the Greek philosopher Timonides and his story – all this is lost. Gibbon tells his readers that this is a loss that affected all of civilized mankind in Europe and the West. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows it.

3. “. . . for *this* is Rome”

The film's second half begins with Lucilla depositing the scrolls of her father's *Meditations* for safe-keeping before leaving Rome. She pleads: “Let not these be destroyed, for *this* is Rome.” Her words summarize what *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is ultimately about: Rome not as a political or military power, but Rome as an ennobling spiritual and cultural force, symbolized by the writings of the philosopher-emperor. The film is a meditation on civilization. As a result it is a work of popular art that differs so fundamentally from all others about ancient Rome as to be unique. The gigantic production was a labor of love on the part of many. All involved succeeded in communicating to their audiences a sense of melancholia and regret, felt over a loss of culture and a descent into tyranny, wars, and barbarism.

As we have seen, a line can readily be extended from historical novels to historical films. Sir Walter Scott's immense influence on later authors and on historical storytellers in print, on the stage, and on the screen is

¹¹⁰ On the controversy, with citations of ancient texts, see Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003; rpt. 2005), 129–132. He follows, among others, R. R. Smith, “Nero and the Sun-God: Divine Accessories and Political Symbols in Roman Imperial Images,” *The Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 13 (2000), 532–542.

the best proof. The main reason for this influence is what Trevelyan said about history: to be effective, it must be “living, many-coloured and romantic.” What better medium today to present history in exactly such terms than the cinema? As Trevelyan makes clear, Scott had what director Mann later called “the feeling of history.” *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is not a work of historical scholarship, and Mann would be the first to affirm that it never could be one or should be considered one. But it is a work that illustrates the imaginative and literary function of historiography, a work capable of entering where no history book could find its way.

But viewers of the film or readers of this chapter need not take my word for it. Instead they could turn to what a much greater authority on Roman history had to say about the film’s theme. I quote this revealing passage at some length:

To the men who had so easily endured toil and peril, anxiety and adversity, the leisure and riches which are generally regarded as so desirable proved a burden and a curse. Growing love of money, and the lust for power which followed it, engendered every kind of evil. Avarice destroyed honour, integrity, and every other virtue, and instead taught men to be proud and cruel, to neglect religion, and to hold nothing too sacred to sell. Ambition tempted many to be false, to have one thought hidden in their hearts, another ready on their tongues, to become a man’s friend or enemy not because they judged him worthy or unworthy but because they thought it would pay them, and to put on the semblance of virtues that they had not. At first these vices grew slowly and sometimes met with punishment; later on, when the disease had spread like a plague, Rome changed: her government, once so just and admirable, became harsh and unendurable.

This could be a summary of Mann’s film such as Will Durant might have provided the Bronston production or marketing staff or a passage from Gibbon or Cassius Dio on the age of Commodus. But it is none of these. It is taken from the Roman historian Sallust, who lived and wrote even before what we call the Roman Empire came into existence. Here he explains the moral decline that led to the fall of the republic. Classical scholars and historians will have recognized the source. How closely Sallust’s words fit the plot and the atmosphere of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is striking.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline* 10.2–6; quoted from S. A. Handford, *Sallust: The Jugurthine War and The Conspiracy of Catiline* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963; several reprints), 181–182. The Catilinarian conspiracy was discovered in 63 BC; Sallust’s historical

Mann concluded his essay on the film with a ringing affirmation of his belief in the nobility of the human spirit, so it may be appropriate if I conclude this chapter by adducing a modern author who affirmed much the same, if from a different perspective. George Orwell, who had participated in the Spanish Civil War and came to witness the fall of a republic to a repressive dictatorship, wrote near the conclusion of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938):

Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings. And I hope the account I have given is not too misleading. I believe that on such an issue as this no one is or can be completely truthful. It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes, and consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan. In case I have not said this somewhere earlier in the book I will say it now: beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact, and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events. And beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period of the Spanish war.¹¹²

While Orwell might well be surprised to find himself quoted in the context of historical cinema, his words fit our subject. Are not all historians, all historical novelists and dramatists, all writers, directors, and producers of historical cinema partisans who want to convince or at least persuade us about the value of their point of view? Of course they are. Such partisanship is a necessary precondition to reach either readers or viewers. How else is it possible for historians or creative artists to learn about and then communicate to others what the decency of human beings or the nobility of the human spirit are like? The facts of history furnish them with the raw material, but their own interest and creativity make it possible to reach others. A feeling of history is indispensable for any presentation of history in fact or fiction. Historiography and fictionalized history in word or image are never identical, but they are closely related. Both are capable of achieving goals worthy of attention, even if their readers and viewers remain partisan.

I close with an instance of non-Jamesian *escamotage*, a sleight of hand that is meant more to summarize the topic of this chapter than to deceive

works – his largest, the *Histories*, is lost except for some fragments – were composed around 44–40 BC.

¹¹² Quoted from George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* and *Looking Back on the Spanish War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; several rpts.), 220.

readers. The following quotation from Georg Lukács does not name the person concerned. Since his text quoted earlier had pointed us in the direction of visual narrative, here his evaluation of a particularly accomplished historical storyteller could be an accurate assessment of Anthony Mann in regard to the plot and main characters of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*:

To awaken distant, vanished ages and enable us to live through them again he had to depict [a] concrete interaction between man and his social environment in the broadest manner . . . It is a question of the concentration of characterization. . . . [He] never under-estimated the importance of picturesque, descriptive elements . . . certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis. It is precisely for this reason that his manner of portraying the historical crisis is never abstract, the split of the nation into warring parties always runs through the centre of the closest human relationships. Parents and children, lover and beloved, old friends etc. confront one another as opponents, or the inevitability of this confrontation carries the collision deep into their personal lives. It is always a fate suffered by groups of people connected and involved with one another; and it is never a matter of one single catastrophe, but of a chain of catastrophes, where the solution of each gives birth to a new conflict. Thus the profound grasp of the historical factor in human life demands a dramatic concentration of the epic framework.¹¹³

The man about whom Lukács was writing is Sir Walter Scott. His words reveal that Scott's historical novels and Mann's historical film are dramatic concentrations of their epic frameworks that awaken vanished ages before our eyes. The fact that Lukács's words about Scott are applicable to Mann's film without even the slightest change tells us much about the latter's quality as historical fiction.¹¹⁴

The Fall of the Roman Empire exhibits most of the virtues and few of the vices found in fictionalized historical narratives told on the grandest scale, whether in word or image. *Gladiator* is a film unthinkable without its model. *Rome*, a television series shown in 2005 and 2007, rebuilt a large-size Forum and took more than seven times as long as Mann's film to tell a fictional story about the fall of the Roman Republic. A few other

¹¹³ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 40–41.

¹¹⁴ Rosen, "Securing the Historical," 26–28, links Lukács's discussion of Scott to the cinema. Cf. also Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today."

films on Roman history have been produced in the digital age. If we measure their quality by how deep a feeling of history they manage to evoke, they are all deficient. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* remains the noblest Roman epic of them all – for *this* is Rome, a portrait of the spirit of its greatest age.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Derek Elley, “*The Fall of the Roman Empire*,” *Films and Filming*, 22 no. 5 (February, 1976), 18–24, at 18, observes that the film “represents the noblest distillation of the historical epic’s virtues.”

CHAPTER TEN

Peace and Power in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Ward W. Briggs, Jr.

In the audio commentary on the DVD edition of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Mel Martin, biographer of producer Samuel Bronston, ascribes the film's box-office failure to the fact that everyone wanted a "happier" film to get their minds off the recent assassination of President John F. Kennedy. After all, 1964 produced three escapist films that are among the top sixty of all time: Robert Stevenson's *Mary Poppins*, a Disney production; Guy Hamilton's *Goldfinger*, a James Bond extravaganza; and George Cukor's *My Fair Lady*, the winner of the Best Picture Oscar. Mann and Bronston could not, of course, have anticipated the effect the assassination would have on their film (if any), but fear of – some might say paranoia over – governmental power in the midst of the Cold War was very much in the air and on screen in 1964: John Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May*, Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe*, and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. The fear of one man with enough power to destroy a nation, whether a sane and reflective American president or a rogue (and insane) military officer, was a common feature of these films. While the first half of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reflects the optimism for world peace based on communication and cooperation that lay behind the founding of the United Nations and the ascendancy of the democratic United States as a superpower to impose a *pax Americana*, the fear of uncontrolled power in the

hands of an unstable leader who brings on the destruction of the world order informs the second half of Mann's epic.

It is a staple of Roman films that the general populace reflects the leader: a self-indulgent amoral Nero leads a decadent population (*Quo Vadis*), the adoring crowd reflects Commodus' unrequited feelings for Maximus in *Gladiator*. So in the 1960s several nations were more than usually invested in their leaders, who formed a charismatic group: Konrad Adenauer, the great reconciliator of Germany; David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel; Charles de Gaulle, President of France and the country's heart in exile during World War II; Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, manager of the Suez Crisis and facilitator of African independence; and Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and instigator of the "thaw" after the horrors of Stalinism. Youngest and most charismatic of them all, however, was President Kennedy. All these men had given distinctive, even heroic, service during the war, and all realized that the nuclear powers had the capability to destroy the world with the push of a button. The awe in which the film holds Marcus Aurelius as the ideal Roman leader reflects the way in which leaders embody what is best in their countries.

Fears of a madman in control of that button were sparked on September 29, 1960, when, during a speech by Macmillan at the United Nations, Khrushchev began pounding his fists on his desk and yelling in Russian. On October 11 the Soviet leader, enraged by remarks from a delegate of the Philippines, pounded a shoe on the table (a spare he had brought along for the purpose) and pointed it menacingly at the delegate. His subsequent admonition to the West, "We will bury you," only increased the tension. (Khrushchev later claimed that he meant this "economically.") The Berlin Wall, which went up overnight on August 13, 1961, seemed to seal the separation and hostility of East and West.

On July 15, 1960, in accepting the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, John F. Kennedy said: "The New Frontier is here whether we seek it or not."¹ The frontier he spoke of encompassed not only these international challenges but domestic ones as well.

The Supreme Court, in deciding *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, sparked an intensification of the struggle for civil rights. It was the country's first large-scale experience with the civil disobedience that Henry David Thoreau had first promulgated as a form of self-reliance. Mahatma

¹ This and subsequent quotations from Kennedy's speech are taken from the direct transcript available at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfk1960dnc.htm>.

Gandhi had successfully used this tactic first in South Africa and then in his native India. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama. A bus boycott followed and drew national attention. More than a year later, on December 21, 1956, Montgomery decided to desegregate its buses. In 1957 President Eisenhower called in 1,000 National Guardsmen to restore order and escort nine black students into the previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. In February, 1960, a sit-in protest at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, had nationwide repercussions. In the next year Freedom Riders from Washington, D.C., headed south to desegregate interstate bus travel. In 1962 James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. But 1963, the year Mann was making his film, was even more tumultuous and tragic. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested after police used fire hoses and police dogs on marchers in Birmingham, Alabama. Medgar Evers, a leader of the NAACP, was murdered outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi. That summer a quarter of a million people attended the March on Washington and heard King's "I Have a Dream" speech. In September four black girls were killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. In November the young president, who earlier in the year had proposed a Voting Rights Act to Congress, was killed in Dallas. Thoreau's message that the individual must challenge unjust acts by the government informed an entire decade, if not an entire generation, that took on governmental authority, organized protests against the Vietnam War, and caused retaliatory police brutality with tear gas, arrest, and even murder.

Amid the reality of the possibility of nuclear annihilation, Hollywood faced a major new threat to its existence in the form of television, which in addition to providing entertainment was now bringing the reality of the McCarthy Hearings, the Hoffa trial, and the assassinations of Kennedy and Kennedy's assassin. On the one hand the studios responded with ever more epic films in color, widescreen, and stereo sound that were meant to dwarf the tiny black-and-white screens in the home. On the other hand, following on the success of the *noir* films of the 1940s, Westerns became more realistic and darker.

The embodiment of this shift was Anthony Mann, who had nurtured his theatrical abilities and ambitions in the socially conscious theaters of New York City's East Village. He had found early success with the Theatre Guild, famous for its productions of the politically contentious plays of George Bernard Shaw and the dark personal dramas of Eugene O'Neill.

Arriving in Hollywood, however, he languished in menial jobs until he received his first opportunity to direct films in 1942. Despite minuscule budgets Mann developed his style and technique, letting lighting, landscape, silent gestures, and other ways of visual storytelling advance the plot as far as possible. When he was able to choose his scripts about five years later, Mann entered a significant but rather brief stage of his career in which he became a master of *film noir*, a genre especially suited to his kind of visual storytelling: the ability to make setting reflect emotion, light and shadow to illustrate the dimensions of moral choice, and sharp edges and angles across the faces of his players to embody the brutal tensions and ugly violence inherent in their crises. Beginning in 1950, Mann shifted primarily, if not exclusively, to Westerns, moving from dark films like *Devil's Doorway*, *The Furies*, and *Winchester '73* – all made in 1950 and all still in the spirit of *film noir*, both stylistically and thematically – to such widescreen and color films as *Man of the West* (1958) and *Cimarron* (1960), the latter a spectacular epic produced – and ruined – by MGM.

In 1959 Mann prepared and started the filming of *Spartacus*. As early as 1950 he had shown some interest in the classical world. In *Winchester '73* he told the story of a family curse in which the hero feels obliged to kill his brother who killed their father, a plot that loosely transported parts of the Greek myth of the House of Atreus to the American West. His next Western, *The Furies*, had a classical title and contained a kind of Greek tragedy, although it was based on a novel that derived from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. He also directed the second unit filming of the burning of Rome for Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), the film that began the great post-war period of epics set in ancient Rome, a period Mann himself would end with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Much about *Spartacus* must have appealed to his political sensibilities, honed at the Theatre Guild, not least the fact that the screenplay was written by blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo from a novel by blacklisted novelist Howard Fast.² Mann plunged into the opening sequence, in which the bleak landscape of the Thracian salt mines reflects, in his proven manner, the psychology and hopeless existence of the slaves.³ “As often as he could, he avoided making films which con-

² See Frederick Ahl, “*Spartacus*, *Exodus*, and Dalton Trumbo: Managing Ideologies of War,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 65–86.

³ Cf. Mann's words in Jean-Claude Missiaen, “Conversation with Anthony Mann,” tr. Martyn Auty, *Framework*, 15–17 (1981), 17–20, at 19: “Kirk Douglas . . . wanted to stress the ‘message’ of the picture. I figured the ‘message’ would be conveyed better by showing *physically* the full horror of slavery. A film has to be visual.”

tained overt moral and political significance."⁴ But producer and star Kirk Douglas wanted the message explicit, "front and center," as Mann put it, so Douglas and Mann parted company after filming the first part of the film, up to the early scenes at Batiatus' gladiator school. Mann was replaced by Stanley Kubrick. He returned to the genre in which he had enjoyed his greatest successes, but when MGM reshot and re-edited *Cimarron* (1960), an epic history of the settling of the West, he washed his hands of the project. Mann left Hollywood for good and found his redemption at once in ancient Rome and modern Spain.

Gigantic epics had become more and more expensive to shoot domestically, but in 1950 Generalissimo Francisco Franco gave filmmakers unusual incentives to film in Spain.⁵ This largely economic initiative by the right-wing dictator immediately caused some unease among the left-wing Hollywood community, but for producers the temptation to film at one-third of domestic costs trumped any political concerns. Producer-director Robert Rossen filmed *Alexander the Great* (1955) in Spain, and producer Stanley Kramer, "one of Hollywood's most noted liberals," followed suit by directing another historical epic, *The Pride and the Passion*, two years later.⁶

Producer Samuel Bronston, an erstwhile manager of MGM's French unit in Paris, had founded his own production company in the midst of World War II. In the late 1950s he bought fully into Franco's offer and established his own independent production company near Madrid for the purpose of creating epics such as the world had not seen.⁷ Bronston was royally treated by *el Caudillo* after he produced Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and Mann's *El Cid* (1961). The screen magnetism of Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren in *El Cid* had drawn praise from the critics, big dollars at the box office, and gratitude from Franco, but Bronston was ready to move beyond Christianity and medieval Spain not only to deliver a sweeping historical story on an unprecedented scale but also to convey his own political beliefs. Looking back on his career in 1988, he observed:

⁴ Quoted from Jeanine Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 4.

⁵ Franco wanted to convince Europeans and Americans that his country was a stable and friendly ally and to draw in production and tourist dollars to his impoverished economy. On the political and economic background see Neal Moses Rosendorf, "'Hollywood in Madrid': American Film Producers and the Franco Regime, 1950-1970," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27 no. 1 (2007), 77-109.

⁶ Rosendorf, "'Hollywood in Madrid'," 85.

⁷ Mel Martin, *The Magnificent Showman: The Epic Films of Samuel Bronston* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor Media: 2007), provides biographical and production details.

Over the years, my companies have worked to produce a sense of national and international pride through epic images of heroism, telling the most passionate of stories of all time . . . I have always been driven by . . . hunger for world peace, world harmony, world friendship.⁸

El Cid's main screenwriter, Ben Barzman, had been blacklisted in Hollywood and fled into European exile. Perhaps fearing Franco's concern over hiring communists, Bronston gave the chief screen credits for *El Cid* and his next epic production, *55 Days at Peking* (1963), to his story and script developer Philip Yordan, who frequently served as a "front" for blacklisted writers, including Barzman.⁹ The critical and financial success of *El Cid*, following the popularity and acclaim of two recent Roman epics, William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Spartacus*, convinced Bronston and his investors to try to cash in on the Roman Empire.

As Mann tells it in "Empire Demolition," he was walking past a bookstore in London when he saw a copy of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He did not have to read very far to gain his story. The book opens with the year 180 AD, the end of the period from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus, which Gibbon had praised as a period in history unparalleled for its prosperity and stability. Here was an epic story to fit Bronston's production values and Mann's affinity for moral men (Marcus Aurelius, Livius) ruthlessly dealt with by immoral opposites (Cleander, Commodus). To Franco and Spain it had the added advantage that Marcus Aurelius' family hailed from Ucubi near Corduba.¹⁰ The age of the Antonines had brought the famous *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, to the empire, while in the early 1960s the prospect of a corresponding *pax Americana*, bought with the Marshall Plan, was a comforting dream in spite or perhaps because of the Cold War.¹¹ Americans were enjoying the highest standard of living in the

⁸ Quoted from Martin, *The Magnificent Showman*, 201–202.

⁹ Details about Barzman's and his wife's experiences with the blacklist and about their European exile appear in Norma Barzman, *The Red and the Blacklist: The Intimate Memoir of a Hollywood Expatriate* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press / Nation Books, 2003; rpt. 2004).

¹⁰ Cf. Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), 28.

¹¹ After the devastations of World War I Europeans invested considerable hope in Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations (1919). Wilson may be the closest modern analogy to Marcus Aurelius, who in turn was the closest to embody the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king. Before becoming governor of New Jersey and then president, Wilson had had a career in law and academia. The latter culminated in his presidency of Princeton University. The League had ultimately failed in its purpose of preventing future wars, but its successor institution, the United Nations, founded in 1945 and resolved to do a better

world, and Western Europe was at peace with itself for the first time in a century.

Any political message contained in the sword-and-sandal epics of 1951–1964 was generally tied to anti-McCarthyism, as in *Spartacus*, or recent forms of totalitarianism like Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism.¹² In *Ben-Hur*, for example, there are overtones of anti-communist witch hunts and the roundup of Jews by Nazis when the evil Roman Messala has Ben-Hur and his family arrested. Viewers of films that showed a deranged and vain megalomaniac like Nero in *Quo Vadis* or Caligula in Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) could instantly call to mind Mussolini and Hitler.

But Bronston and Mann chose a different path. They enlisted Basilio Franchina as co-screenwriter for his broad historical knowledge of the period (and close association with star Sophia Loren) while Barzman wrote the bulk of the script, receiving his first credit since being black-listed. His take on the consequences of absolute power concentrated in the hands of first the wise (Marcus Aurelius) and then the insane (Commodus) against good citizens showed itself, for example, in the good emperor's concern about peace and equality among nations and evil Commodus' threat to destroy whole provinces at a whim. The scene of Marcus' philosopher-confidant Timonides being tortured by barbaric Germans before compromising his beliefs reflects Barzman's admiration for those who would go to jail before naming names for McCarthy. After collapsing in pain at the foot of a statue of Wotan, Timonides feels remorse that his faith was not strong enough and guilt at his lack of courage, feelings that many of those who gave in to the Hollywood inquisition may have felt as well.¹³

job than its predecessor, promised to ensure world peace under American eyes and with its headquarters on American soil. It seemed to many Europeans at that point that their safety against the encroachments of the Soviet Union lay in the hands of the United Nations and thus the United States. Throughout the Cold War the UN served its function, helping to maintain peace between East and West while trying to improve the lot of mankind the world over.

¹² On this see, e.g., Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 50–76.

¹³ On this cf., among numerous other works, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–60* (1983; rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). On the moral dimensions of McCarthyism in Hollywood see especially Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (1980; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

Location shooting appealed to Mann because it required actors to interact with natural conditions as much as with other actors: “when an actor has to play it on top of a mountain, by a river or in a forest, you’ve got the wind, the dust, the snow, the creaking of branches interrupting him, forcing him to give more; he becomes that much more alive.”¹⁴ So Mann brought to his Westerns, especially to the early ones already mentioned and to *The Naked Spur* (1953) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955) a strong *noir* sensibility of the isolated individual at odds with society and, as in *Man of the West*, with himself. The protagonist is forced into an existential decision set deep within the mythic grandeur of the Western landscape, which functions virtually as a character itself.

The words of historian Will Durant in the film’s prologue and epilogue cloaked in a scholarly mantle the message of the new political climate that Bronston wished his film to convey. True to Mann’s practice of using landscape to express character, the film begins not in sunny Rome, with corrupt rulers indulging the perquisites of power, but rather on the forbidding border of Germania in the depths of winter. The opening is the embodiment of the then-modern political context of the Cold War: it is cold, and Rome is at war. Rome also stands at the edge of a new frontier, invoking Kennedy’s vision. Nor is the emperor a babbling faux-artiste like the Nero of *Quo Vadis* but a man of ideas skillfully expressed, more of a Kennedy than an Eisenhower.

Indeed its first spectacular sequence is not an action scene as in Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000) but a statement of enlightened ideas by the emperor to an assembly of leaders. Echoing President Kennedy, Marcus Aurelius tells them: “Rome wants and needs human frontiers.” Bronston’s dream of world peace is expressed in the culmination of Marcus Aurelius’ vision: “Golden centuries of peace – that is what lies ahead.” The Roman emperor’s speech to the gathered chieftains echoes many of the points Kennedy made when he accepted his party’s presidential nomination. Both speeches contain key words that define modern international and domestic idealism. Kennedy, for instance, emphasized the danger of nuclear annihilation: “The world has been close to war before, but now man, who’s survived all previous threats to his existence, has taken into his mortal hands the power to exterminate his species seven times over.” Marcus describes a diverse world that closely resembles the American melting pot or the diverse nations of the twentieth century, all united on one blue planet that a nuclear war would destroy:

¹⁴ Quoted from Philip Kemp, “Mann, Anthony,” in John Wakeman (ed.), *World Film Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: Wilson, 1987), 723–731, at 725.

You do not resemble each other, nor do you wear the same clothes nor sing the same songs nor worship the same gods. Yet like a mighty tree with green leaves and black roots you are the unity which is Rome. Look about you and look at yourselves, and see the greatness of Rome.

We begin to realize that this film will have as its hero not one man but one nation.¹⁵ Rome will fall from a failure of unity of purpose in pursuit of peace. The speech continues in a reflection of the American-European experience. For Marcus' "Gauls" read "Germans," for his "barbarians" read "Soviets," for his "Persians" read "Chinese":

Two hundred years ago the Gauls were our fiercest enemies. Now we greet them as friends. In the whole world only two small frontiers are hostile to us: one here in the north, which separates us from those who are called barbarians; the other in the East, Persia. Only on these two borders will you find walls, palisades, forts, and hatred. But these are not the frontiers Rome wants.

Kennedy said in his acceptance speech:

we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960's, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats.

By invoking "golden centuries," Marcus Aurelius is virtually echoing both a Golden Age of peace as envisioned in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, a poem that promises new peace after a devastating period of civil wars, and Kennedy's words about the world to come:

Rome wants and needs human frontiers. We've had to fight long wars. Your burdens have been great. But we come now to the end of the road. Here, within our reach, golden centuries of peace – a true *pax Romana*.

Kennedy rebuked those who simply wished to hear "more assurances of a golden future." The society of the New Frontier would address the ongoing "peaceful revolution for human rights, demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life, [which] has strained at the leashes imposed by a timid executive leadership." The film's Marcus Aurelius accordingly continues:

¹⁵ So already Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 105.

Wherever you live, whatever the color of your skin, when peace is achieved it will bring to all – *all* – the supreme right of Roman citizenship . . . No longer provinces or colonies but Rome, Rome everywhere, a family of equal nations. That is what lies ahead.

Unfortunately it was not what lay ahead in history, neither in antiquity nor in the twentieth century. Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963. When *The Fall of the Roman Empire* opened in the United States in March, 1964, viewers saw that Marcus Aurelius had been assassinated as well, although the murder and the reason behind it as shown in the film are both unhistorical. Many viewers could be expected to see a parallel between the deaths of well-liked political leaders. And many believed that a domestic conspiracy was behind Kennedy's death, just as it was with the film's emperor. Since the screenplay had been written well before the events in Dallas, the parallel cannot have been intentional. Nevertheless it is almost uncanny.

In the second part of the film one emperor's dream of peace is subverted by another's abuse of power. The grand ideas of Marcus on government, virtue, life, and death are doomed because of the emperor's (unhistorical) rejection of the son who would succeed him. Timonides, Marcus' daughter Lucilla, and Livius embody the strength, courage, and integrity that had made Rome great and whose absence, corruption, or failure will make Rome fall. Timonides' courage under fire torture so impresses the Germans that they deny their god and agree to become Romans. Unhistorically, Lucilla even joins an eastern rebellion against Commodus. Livius resists Commodus but stays loyal to Rome even at great personal sacrifice. But their efforts are doomed. Lucilla, obedient to her father's wishes, deposits his *Meditations* in the senate library, symbolically both preserving and burying his ideals as Commodus comes to power with the intent to ignore them completely. Commodus begins his rule by announcing that the gods wanted him to become emperor. He then dances a small jig on the map of the Roman Empire embedded in the floor, a reminiscence of Mussolini walking over the names of conquered nations on the floor of his office and of the well-known images in newsreels and newspaper photographs of Hitler breaking into a brief dance after the fall of France. By doubling the taxes and imports due from the eastern provinces against the wishes of his advisers, Commodus ensures the main plotline of the rest of the film, the rebellion of these provinces.

A fair portion of the plot involves the disposition of the Germans. Livius argues in the senate for settling them on abandoned lands and

granting them citizenship. Livius, who considers himself principally a soldier, wants to remain outside the discussion and has Timonides speak for his plan.¹⁶ Timonides is at first taunted for being a Greek and a slave, but he responds: “Born a Greek, I became a Roman by choice. Born a slave, I won my freedom.” The speech itself, an eloquent counterpart to Marcus Aurelius’ speech in the first part of the film, recalls the victors’ harsh treatment of Germany after World War I: “the *hatred* that we leave behind us never dies. Hatred means wars.” Timonides reasons accurately: “How costly that is, how wasteful!” There is, however, a way out: “And yet the answer is simple. We must have no war.” Some viewers may even have thought of the different treatment of Germany after World War II, when the Marshall Plan provided support for the country’s recovery and turned former enemies into faithful allies and supporters.

Marcus’ speech had chiefly reminded us of American foreign policy, but Timonides’ speech also addresses the contemporary domestic situation, especially the century-long American debate on slavery, immigration, and civil rights. Timonides stresses the economic weaknesses of the slave system in arguments heard in America before the Civil War. Timonides also echoes Marcus Aurelius’ and Kennedy’s new human frontiers. When the debate heats up and one of Commodus’ henchmen invokes “the end of Rome,” an elderly senator takes over. Clearly an authority figure, he reminds everybody present of the “four great emperors” who had ruled before Commodus. The senator, whose only scene in the film this is, also invokes the death of any empire, even their own: “there comes a time when its people no longer believe in it. Then, then does an empire begin to die.” The empire, he says, has been able to grow because it has been able to change: “The law of life is: grow or die.” He concludes with an impassioned plea: “Honorable Fathers, we have changed the world – can we not change ourselves?” The senator wins the day, and the Germans are peacefully settled. But Commodus is still in power.

The prosperity of the resettled Germans under the leadership of Timonides contrasts with famine, pestilence, and unrest in Rome. The Germans share their abundant bread freely at their festival and brandish the loaves with joy, like their citizenship, which Commodus’ henchman in the senate debate had said would be “as cheap as bread.” Timonides asserts this citizenship by addressing the Germans as “Romans,” carry-

¹⁶ In the DVD commentary Bronston’s son claims that an important speech that dealt with differing views on how society should be constructed was cut from the film’s second half. The speech most likely took place during this debate.

ing on Marcus Aurelius' themes of unity and peace: "Now can we say to our senate, to our empire, to the whole world: Look! Here we meet in friendship, the blond people from the North, the dark people from the South. What we have done here could be done the whole world over" – Marcus' *pax Romana* and Bronston's *pax Americana* message in full.

But the prosperity of the Germans is an affront to the emperor, so a contingent arrives to lay waste the harvest of unity. Timonides begs the "men of Rome" to let the Germans live in peace; otherwise the Northern people would respond with hate: "Their hatred will live for centuries to come. Rivers of Roman blood will pay for this." The Roman response to Timonides is a spear to his chest.

In addition to the brutal treatment of such high-minded rhetoric, there are other signs that the empire is coming apart. First was Commodus' claim that the gods had told him that he was their choice for emperor. In the world of 1964, happily free from television evangelists who are daily in touch with their Lord about political issues, such a statement was a sign of mental derangement. At the end, when Commodus has declared himself a god to the enthusiastic cheers of the senate, Americans knew for certain that he was insane.

The weakness of pure intellect against the overweening power of the deranged and the irresponsible presents us with an empire whose eventual fate is embodied in two men who share responsibility for the fall of Rome. Even Marcus Aurelius, a flawed and cuckolded husband (as he was regarded in ancient rumors), an indifferent father, and a ruler distant from the center of power, Rome, plants the seeds of the empire's fall despite all his grand talk of unity and equality by rejecting his own son. The film does not portray Marcus Aurelius as incarnation of the best of Rome, for then he would have taken earlier and more decisive steps against Commodus. This is the more so because Marcus is fully aware of Commodus' irresponsibility and immorality. And he knows what Commodus will turn out to be like. After all Marcus says to himself: "Were it not in the nature of a fig-tree to give figs, as the honeybee to give honey, for the lion to fall upon the lamb?" This is a direct echo of one of the historical emperor's *Meditations*. Remember, he exhorts himself, "that the fig-tree should be what does the work of a fig-tree, the dog of a dog, the bee of a bee, and man the work of a man."¹⁷ Here, as already in Greek tragedy and its most famous example, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the hero is

¹⁷ An echo of *Meditations* Book 10.8; quoted from A. S. L. Farquharson (tr.), *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; rpt. 2008), 93. This book also contains a selection of the letters of Marcus and his teacher Fronto. Farquharson's translation first appeared in 1944.

introduced at the height of his powers but carrying within him the tragic flaw that will destroy him. Similarly, Commodus displays the hubris of tragedy; his dance across the empire's map, already discussed, is comparable to Agamemnon stepping on the red carpet that represents the blood shed in the Trojan War and his own, soon to be shed, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The identification of the people with their leader, so much a feature of the 1960s, results in the people following the emperor into madness, oblivious of their doom. Hence the carnival-like atmosphere that engulfs Rome at the film's end.

Mann shared Bronston's perspective. The Romans' refusal to extend citizenship to the conquered Germans recalls *Devil's Doorway* (1950), in which a Shoshone Indian, a Civil War hero, finds that he has no rights in the country for which he risked his life. Here and in Mann's world of violence it is the strong, not the just, who make and enforce the rules. Mann's regular plotlines of a morally compromised hero battling with an opponent who represents evil and of a flawed hero struggling with himself, as in *Bend of the River* (1952) and most memorably in *The Naked Spur*, now converge and change. In one of the film's key scenes, Marcus Aurelius, sick, exhausted, and facing imminent death, is reduced to withdrawing himself into his *Meditations* against the son who will overturn all his accomplishments.

The overall vision of producer and director may roughly be summarized in the following way. In its theme, the film's first half is all Bronston's optimism about the chances for world peace through world unity. But the settings and production values of this part, set on the frontier, bear Mann's personal signature: dark and wintry exteriors, shadowy and sparsely decorated interiors, sputtering torches (to ancient Romans, an evil omen), political intrigue, the moral musings of a great but doomed man, and a stealthy murder perpetrated by a treacherous confidant. By contrast, the production values of the second half are all Bronston's: enormous sunlit exteriors of the city of Rome, gleaming white marble temples, elegant, bright, and lavish palace interiors, and opulent costumes. But the theme, pessimism or even despair about the world controlled by a madman and soon to be haggled over by a bunch of callous power grabbers, the evil counterparts of the hero who is reduced to walking off in defeat even after his victory over the mad emperor, is characteristic of Mann.

When the decision was made about thirty-five years later to shoot the first large-scale epic film set in ancient Rome, it may have seemed odd to those who remembered film history that the time and setting of Scott's *Gladiator* would be the same as in the very film credited with ending

Hollywood's post-war fascination with sword-and-sandal epics.¹⁸ But the title of Scott's film shows that he chose to tell the story of one man rather than treat an enormous historical process. To do so, Scott divided *Gladiator* into three derivative parts.¹⁹ Only the first, set on the frontier in Germany, derives primarily from *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Maximus' long horseback ride from Germany to his farm in Spain begins the revenge portion of the film, a theme standard in Westerns. When Maximus arrives too late to save his family from horrible deaths, derived largely from the same genre, we see a parallel to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Once Maximus has been captured by Arab slave traders, the gladiatorial portion of the film begins, heavily indebted to *Spartacus*. When Maximus is brought to Rome as a gladiator, we are back into the world of political intrigue and treachery that is *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, culminating in the hero's duel against Commodus, if with a different outcome.

Gladiator reflects a different style of filmmaking, and its chief interest is the story of Maximus, but its ending is expressly political. The events of 180 AD as depicted by Mann suited Scott equally well. Naturally there are plot differences between the two films, and characters are drawn slightly differently. The portrayal of Marcus Aurelius' relationship with his daughter is an example. Marcus is a loving father to Lucilla in Mann's film, pained by having to force her into a marriage for reasons of state. Scott's Marcus admits that he has been a bad father, but he admires her imperial qualities and recognizes her potential: "What a Caesar you would have made." The Lucilla of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* actually becomes a leader her father would have been proud of.

American political – or imperial – supremacy was clearly on Scott's mind.²⁰ With the Berlin Wall torn down, Eastern Europe freed, the Soviet Union collapsed, and China easing its communist principles, America stood as the only superpower in the world. The opening credits of *Gladiator* announce that the Roman Empire has reached "the height of its power" and that "one final stronghold stands in the way of Roman victory and the promise of peace throughout the empire." General Maximus tells Marcus Aurelius: "There's no one left to fight." He could be speaking of America, but the Rome of *Gladiator* is a far cry from the ideal egalitarianism we saw in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. According

¹⁸ So Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 87 and 90.

¹⁹ For further details see my "Layered Allusions in *Gladiator*," *Arion*, n.s. 15 no. 3 (Winter, 2008), 9–38.

²⁰ Cf. Emily Albu, "Gladiator at the Millennium," *Arethusa*, 41 (2008), 185–204.

to Scott's Marcus Aurelius, the empire is already sick to its core, and Maximus must "give power back to the people of Rome and end the corruption that has crippled it."

Scott, like Mann, is adept at delivering his points visually. In particular, he alludes to Leni Riefenstahl's famous (or infamous) documentary about the 1934 Nazi rally at Nuremberg, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), most clearly in Commodus' triumph in Rome. His entry into Rome is a direct quotation of Riefenstahl's shots of Hitler's plane flying into Nuremberg through the clouds at the beginning of *Triumph of the Will*, followed by *der Führer* riding in an open car through adoring crowds.²¹ Mann staged Commodus' triumph as the grand sweeping march of one who holds supreme power, forsaking any political comment in favor of showing the spectacular set of the Roman Forum. Although it is much shorter, Scott enlarges his version by allusion to Riefenstahl in order to show the peril inherent in triumphal adulations.

Nazi allusions continue in the imperial scenes. Maximus tells Marcus that the army fought the Germans "for you and for Rome," echoing Rudolf Hess's words to Hitler in *Triumph of the Will*: "You are the state." Commodus suggests a sexual union with his sister to produce offspring of "pure blood" to "rule for a thousand years." At the end of *Gladiator* black-clad Praetorian Guards run through the streets of Rome and arrest or murder political opponents, a parallel to SS roundups and summary executions of political enemies and Jews.

By the time the tale of Maximus' revenge has nearly played itself out, Rome is prepared for the power vacuum that will follow Commodus' death. Scott has carefully set up the three elements important for the resolution of his plot, commenting on the dangers inherent in the three chief forms of government: democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. Democracy is merely ochlocracy – mob rule. Proximo had told Maximus: "Win the crowd, win your freedom." Senator Gracchus observed: "Rome is the mob . . . The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the senate, it is the sand of the Colosseum." Aristocracy is represented by senators Gracchus and Cassius – both loaded names – who despise the people and seek to use Maximus' popularity to restore the republic and with it the power of the senate. Commodus represents tyranny, which must fall as inevitably and violently as had European totalitarianism of the twentieth century.

²¹ On *Triumph of the Will* and *Gladiator* see especially Arthur J. Pomeroy, "The Vision of a Fascist Rome in *Gladiator*," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 111–123, and my "Layered Allusion in *Gladiator*," 22–26.

Scott's Roman epic was a huge success, but it owes an enormous debt to Mann's film. Mann's choice of his historical milieu was still as meaningful to the political situation of 2000 as it had been to the rather different situation of 1964. Mann provided Scott with a model of how events and characters of Roman history could be used to comment on the current political scene and make ancient Rome relevant again to modern America. As Mann and Bronston used a Roman emperor to deliver a Kennedyesque message of inclusion and equality, so Scott used a sociopathic boy emperor, the only major role in the film played by an American, to remind Americans at the threshold of the new century that their government was to a large part modeled on the Roman Republic. Just as Mann used the desolate German landscape and the opulent reconstruction of the Forum to reinforce his themes of isolation and excessive power, so Scott uses allusion to other films as a visual means to deliver his political message. Bronston's wish for a *pax Americana* and Mann's dark estimate of the mind of the powerful converge in Scott's fear of America, the lone superpower in the world at the millennium, answerable to no one and in danger, in Scott's view, of totalitarianism. Scott tells his story through the heroic struggle of one man. Mann told his in two parts, one a meditation on the possibilities of peace, the other a demonstration of the corruption of an empire so powerful that it is helpless against its own corruption. Such differences of style, plot, and theme as exist between the two films only underscore Scott's choice of subject-matter as a direct homage to Mann's under-appreciated film and as a testament to his intelligence and vision.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Politics of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Peter W. Rose

It is perhaps pure coincidence or a manifestation of the hysteria that periodically characterizes imperialist societies that we are witnesses today to a striking obsession with the same implicit anxiety over the fate of the American empire that is projected in the film's exploration of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire.¹ As recently as 2000, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, which is clearly based on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, displayed a striking indifference to issues of empire.² It is an unavoidable aspect of the politics of film production that films with explicitly political themes represent a creative response, however mediated, to concerns and anxieties of contemporary audiences. It is therefore essential for us, in discussing the politics of *The Fall of the Roman*

¹ On such hysteria cf. David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994; rpt. 2001), 11. In general see, for example, Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2007; rpt. New York: Mariner Books, 2008), and Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (2006; rpt. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008). For an intriguing account of the vicissitudes of the use and avoidance of the term "empire" with reference to the United States see John Bellamy Foster, "The Rediscovery of Imperialism," *Monthly Review*, 54 no. 6 (2002), 1–16.

² So I argued in "The Politics of *Gladiator*," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 150–172.

Empire, to attempt to recapture, however summarily, the political unconscious or the political consciousness of American citizens in 1963, the latest point in time which can have influenced the creators of the film. In view of the mixed reception of the film, however, it is possible that the creators misread their audience and projected onto them their own political visions. In the following pages I examine what seems to me the primary inspiration of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*: the anxieties of empire.

1. The Historical Context

The Cold War figured prominently in earlier “toga movies,” as they have been called.³ In such films as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Spartacus* (1960) Rome is consistently represented as a militaristic, decadent, slave-exploiting, and corrupt example of a totalitarian society sharply at odds with what are represented as quintessentially “American” values such as freedom and the one true religion of Christianity.⁴ Whatever their artistic merits, these films participated in promulgating the myth of US anti-imperialism.

The essence of the myth that sustained the Cold War was the idea that the Soviet Union was an expansive power determined to take over the world. The language of enslavement was a key component in this. “On television, [John Foster] Dulles pointed to a map that showed the areas of the world under Communist control and said, ‘Our nation must stand as a solid rock in a storm-tossed world. To all those suffering under Communist *slavery*, to the timid and intimidated people of the world, let us say this: you can count upon us.’ Eisenhower, in his State of the Union message, reiterated the theme, promising that the United States would

³ For an excellent discussion see William Fitzgerald, “Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie,” in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 23–49. See also Martin M. Winkler, “The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945,” in *Imperial Projections*, 50–76. I am not convinced that Nazi Germany played quite as great a role in the Roman epic films of the 1950s as did the Soviet Union. On this see Marty Jexer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945–1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), especially 33–52 on the Truman administration’s demonizing of the Soviet Union and rehabilitation of Germany.

⁴ *Spartacus* deals with a period before the birth of Jesus, but the opening voiceover describes the crime of slavery in terms that suggest it will be ended by Christianity. Cf. below.

'never acquiesce in the *enslavement* of any people.'"⁵ But the Soviet Union, which had borne the brunt of World War II, losing between twenty and twenty-five million lives, and had suffered the total devastation of vast areas of its territory, was neither inclined toward nor capable of a major war. Like the Russian empire before it, the Soviet Union, lacking natural borders for its territory, was obsessed with having adequate buffers against the sort of devastating invasions it had suffered in 1812, 1914, and 1941, not to mention earlier ones.

Dismissing the wave of nationalism that swept the world at the end of World War II as a mere front for Soviet intervention, the United States pursued its own aggressive counterrevolutionary interventionism throughout the world. Although Prime Minister Winston Churchill had negotiated Soviet Russia's cooperation in the British war against Greek communists, who had been the backbone of resistance to the Nazis, and Russia had maintained a hands-off policy there, President Harry Truman launched his Doctrine "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities around the world" and took over the British struggle in Greece.⁶ To the horror of Russia and the consternation of France, the United States reindustrialized its portion of Germany, which it integrated fully with the needs of the US economy. Through the CIA the United States overthrew Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in Iran for nationalizing the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and installed the Shah as an American puppet ruler.⁷ When, in Guatemala, President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán nationalized uncultivated land owned by the United Fruit Company, an American corporation with close ties to Allen Dulles, Director of Central Intelligence, John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, and other officials in the federal government, the CIA engineered a coup to overthrow him and installed Carlos Castillo Armas, a dictator who was assassinated three years later.⁸ Refusing to sign the 1954 Geneva Accord ending France's colonial war in Vietnam, the United States engineered the cancellation of promised elections there and installed as president of South Vietnam its own brutal puppet, Ngo Dinh Diem.⁹ In response to the success of the Cuban revolution the Eisenhower administration

⁵ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 60; emphases added.

⁶ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 23–24.

⁷ William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1995; rpt. 1998), 64–72.

⁸ Blum, *Killing Hope*, 72–83.

⁹ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 82–96.

dispatched assassins, planes that bombed and strafed Cuba, and saboteurs who blew up a French freighter unloading munitions in Havana harbor.¹⁰ These are merely some of the more egregious instances of US interventionism during the 1950s. There were many more.¹¹

In retrospect it seems amazing how effectively Cold War myths concocted by their government and dutifully echoed by the news media and Hollywood shielded the vast majority of the American people from an awareness of political reality. To find out what is uniquely different from earlier Cold War film images of Rome in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, we have to ask what had changed. Two striking factors are the intensification of the Civil Rights Movement at home and the articulateness of Cuban leadership, especially Fidel Castro's, as displayed at the United Nations. The Civil Rights Movement disillusioned many white people of goodwill with the self-serving image of the United States as the world's bastion of freedom. In a speech at the UN on September 26, 1960, that lasted for an hour and a half, Castro was able to give voice to a vast wave of nationalist revolutionary feeling. Both the geographic range of his indictment, a representation of Cuba's situation before the revolution as typical of the whole Third World, and his repeated use of the terms "empire" and "imperialism" aimed at unmasking a carefully constructed image of the United States as the heroic defender of what was routinely called the "free world." With heavy irony Castro spelled out as "marvels" the horrific conditions in Cuba that the victors of the revolution encountered and for which they blamed the economic domination of Cuba by the United States:

Public utilities, electricity and telephone services all belonged to the United States monopolies. A major portion of the banking business, of the importing business and the oil refineries, the greater part of the sugar production, the best land in Cuba, and the most important industries in all fields belonged to U.S. companies. The balance of payments in the last ten years, from 1950 to 1960, had been favorable to the United States with regard to Cuba to the extent of one thousand million dollars . . . They [the disastrous consequences for the Cuban people] were no more and no less than the usual wonders of imperialism, which are in themselves the wonders of the free world as far as we, the colonies, are concerned!¹²

¹⁰ Blum, *Killing Hope*, 184–193.

¹¹ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, especially 17–76, gives the most concise overview. See also Blum, *Killing Hope*, 124–127, and Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (1976; rpt. New York: Pantheon, 1984), 348–398.

¹² Fidel Castro, "The Problem of Cuba and Its Revolutionary Policy." Here and below I quote from the text of the speech at <http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1960/09/26.htm>.

As they usually still do, American high-school history texts had represented “imperialism” as the formal possession of colonies ruled by occupying troops and appointed governors.¹³ The implications of viewing Cuba as a typical “colony” of the US “empire” were shocking for most North Americans but are spelled out repeatedly in the same speech:

The case of Cuba is not [an] isolated case . . . The case of Cuba is the case of all underdeveloped countries. The case of Cuba is like that of the Congo, Egypt, Algeria, Iran . . . like that of Panama, which wishes to have its canal; it is like that of Puerto Rico, whose national spirit they are destroying; like that of Honduras, a portion of whose territory has been alienated. In short . . . the case of Cuba is the case of all the underdeveloped, colonialized countries.

To grasp the full impact of this critique we have to be aware of both the more than ten-year effort of the United States to foster its image as Cold War hero and the make-up of the UN audience in 1960, much of which was drawn from the colored peoples of recently liberated former colonies. Castro called explicit attention to this fact:

Here in this Assembly, where the majority of the underdeveloped countries are represented, he [an extraterrestrial visitor newly learning about the modern world] would say: “The majority of the peoples you represent are being exploited; they have been exploited for a long time. The form of exploitation may have changed, but you are still being exploited.” That would be the verdict.

Castro repeatedly alluded to his expulsion from a hotel in central Manhattan which led to an extraordinary outpouring of black sympathy when he accepted the invitation of the Hotel Theresa in central Harlem. There Castro met with Malcolm X, a striking reminder to all present of the racism rampant in the United States.¹⁴

I certainly do not mean to imply that a single speech could explain as striking a shift in thinking about the American empire as we see in *The*

¹³ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6 no. 1 (1953), 1–16, introduced the distinction between “formal” and “informal” imperialism, which has played an important role since in serious discussions of the phenomenon of imperialism. Cf. Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 19–50. The American public and the US government have generally preferred, for obvious reasons, to stick to the formal definition.

¹⁴ On this meeting see Rosemary Mealy, *Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1993).

Fall of the Roman Empire, but I do think it is symptomatic of the whole array of factors that might have led politically conscious Americans to a new level of anxiety about their country's role in the world. A revealing testimonial to that anxiety is the Port Huron Statement, released by the Students for a Democratic Society in June 1962.¹⁵ A note of anxiety is struck early in the text: "Some would have us believe that Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity – but might it not better be called a glaze above deeply felt anxieties about their role in new world?" Though it is careful to catalogue the flaws and aggressive gestures of the Soviet Union, again and again the statement indicts the role of what Eisenhower had dubbed the "military-industrial complex," stressing the commitment of more than half the federal budget to the military and the government's failure to respond to the wave of anti-colonial revolutions sweeping the world with anything other than repression and support for dictators. Scathing critique of US militarism, racism, lack of true democracy, and the reactionary responses to the aspirations of the underdeveloped countries is only one element in this document, which is primarily devoted to spelling out a utopian vision for fundamental change. The single greatest source of hope it cites is the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Since 1956 Martin Luther King, Jr., had been leading an increasingly broad-based movement that linked itself to the aspirations of the world's colonized peoples. Speaking of his visit in 1959 to India, "the land of Gandhi," he commented: "We were looked upon as brothers with the color of our skins as something of an asset. But the strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism."¹⁶

The assassination in November, 1963, of President Kennedy was the trigger for a new level of pessimism about their country for many Americans, especially the younger generation. Tom Hayden, a key co-author of the Port Huron Statement, has vividly described his reaction:

This was the most unexpected happening in my life, having been raised in the climate of a stable American presidency – that of Franklin Roosevelt – in an unstable and warring world. C. Wright Mills had described American society as fundamentally stable, a mass society in the hands of a powerful elite with shared interests. But the 'lone assassin' Oswald had single-

¹⁵ Available at <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>. Some 100,000 copies of the pamphlet were distributed.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992), 39–48, at 42.

handedly shattered this stability and determined the presidency with a single bullet . . . The scent of evil and the cloud of tragedy, forces beyond knowing and control, were now present in my life in a more personal way than ever before. I cried for John Kennedy's small, saluting son, for his family, for myself. The tragic consciousness of the sixties generation began here, and would continue to grow.¹⁷

The combination of an emerging – especially in Cuba – and strongly articulated anti-imperialism in the United Nations, the emergence of an American Civil Rights Movement with international consciousness and a radical wing led by Malcolm X, a nascent student movement with its passionate repudiation of the Cold War and utopian vision for the future, and the despair and pessimism engendered by the assassination of a young president who seemed capable of learning from the mistakes of his predecessors – all this goes a long way toward explaining the anxieties of empire as we can observe them in the film.

2. The Politics of Empire

The politics of empire in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* take the form of a stark opposition between a utopian vision of peace and brotherhood between and among all the nations of the earth and the grim reality of ruthless exploitation, brutal repression, civil war, and the breakdown of credible government. The film's dark opening points to the ambiguous options facing the empire. A British-accented voiceover reassures us that the title of the film is indeed its subject:

Two of the greatest problems in history are how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall. We may come nearer to understanding the truth if we remember that the fall of Rome, like her rise, had not one cause but many. It was not an event but a process, spread over three hundred years. Some nations have not lasted as long as Rome fell.

The final line quoted here may have triggered the anxieties of Americans who were then only twelve years away from the bicentennial celebration of the founding of their country. The voiceover leads us to expect that the film will focus on the politics of empire. A slow pan along a huge fortress covered in dark gray clouds ends with a closer focus on three men. The first words we hear reinforce the ominous thrust of the initial

¹⁷ Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), 114–115.

voiceover. The blind priest Cleander, who will play an important part later, is examining the dead body of a sacrificial animal – a dove, symbol of peace – and informs Emperor Marcus Aurelius: “My lord Caesar, the omens are bad. I could not find its heart.” As we shall see, imagery of the heart will play a significant part later in the film. Caesar reinforces the dark mood with his recollection of a childhood fear “that we would live out our lives in total darkness” – an anticipation perhaps of the Dark Ages to follow the fall of Rome. He also hints at his imminent death: “It seems to me the night whispers, ‘Come away with me to the West, sleep forever.’” Soon General Livius, a fictional character whose concern for Caesar’s health reinforces the earlier hints at the emperor’s imminent demise, reassures him that in a few days he will bring him the head of Ballomar, leader of the hostile Germans. Caesar replies: “No, Livius, please don’t bring me his head; I wouldn’t know what to do with it. Bring him to me alive.” Livius objects: “But he is the heart of the barbarians,” and Marcus retorts: “Then bring me the heart of the barbarians. I wish to speak with him . . . Rome has existed for a thousand years. It is time we found peaceful ways to live with those you call barbarians.” Livius soon asks after Lucilla, the emperor’s daughter, whom we first encounter praying to Vesta for the health of her father, whose precarious future is now explicitly linked with the dark prospects of the empire: “Protect us from the danger that hangs over the empire, let there be peace over all Rome.”

The full utopian prospect for Rome is spelled out in a historically implausible assembly of all the empire’s rulers in one remote place on the German border as if in a kind of proto-United Nations. Marcus Aurelius’ address encompasses the whole of the Roman Empire. He says in part:

You have come from the deserts of Egypt, from the mountains of Armenia, from the forests of Gaul, and the prairies of Spain. You do not resemble each other, nor do you wear the same clothes, nor sing the same songs, nor worship the same gods. Yet like a mighty tree with green leaves and black roots, you are the unity which is Rome. Look about you and look at yourselves, and see the greatness of Rome . . . Rome wants and needs human frontiers. We’ve had to fight long wars. Your burdens have been great. But now we come to the end of the road. Here, within our reach, golden centuries of peace, a true *pax Romana*. Wherever you live, whatever the color of your skin, when peace is achieved, it will bring to all, *all*, the supreme right of Roman citizenship. [*Prolonged loud cheering*] . . . No longer provinces or colonies, but Rome, Rome everywhere. A family of equal nations, that is what lies ahead.

Several details in this speech stand out for their contemporary resonance. The very phrase *pax Romana*, the only Latin spoken in the film, rather than adding a touch of authenticity, calls attention to itself as a metaphor. The reference to skin color speaks directly of the Civil Rights Movement, which had seen the 1957 federal intervention in Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the Supreme Court's desegregation order; the emergence of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality; the Freedom Riders; Malcolm X; the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi; the murder of Medgar Evers; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s arrest and subsequent *Letter from Birmingham Jail*; the March on Washington and King's "I Have a Dream" speech; and, ugliest of all, the murder of four little girls in the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. The phrases "no longer colonies or provinces" and "a family of equal nations" speak directly to the decolonization of much of the world after World War II, specifically of the founding of the United Nations. The initial evocation of unity out of difference is a tacit appeal to the immigrant traditions of the United States and to its very motto *E pluribus unum*.

The counter-movement to this utopian prospect resides in Marcus Aurelius' son Commodus, the next emperor. Unhistorically, Marcus declares to Livius and Lucilla: "Commodus must never be my heir . . . I had hoped that position and responsibility would make him grow up. He is interested only in games and gladiators." Marcus expresses his intention to name Livius as his successor within earshot of a now sinister Cleander. Marcus' decision triggers his murder by supporters of Commodus, who do not, however, include Commodus in their plot. "He must never know," declares one of the conspirators, who later appears as a key supporter of Commodus in a crucial senate debate. In the absence of any documentary proof of Marcus' intentions Livius yields to Commodus' self-proclamation as emperor and further supports it by himself proclaiming Commodus sole emperor. For this he is rewarded with supreme command of Rome's armies. Livius attempts to implement Marcus' vision, to which, despite initial incomprehension, he now appears a complete and committed convert.

Commodus is represented as Livius' dearest friend and "brother." Despite having been part of the imperial family for years, Livius seems oblivious of the negative aspects of Commodus that were obvious to his father and sister. The reunion of Commodus and Livius, interlocking arms, squirting wine from skins, and collapsing on each other laughing, strikes me as a far more suggestive re-play of the gay-lovers reunion scene that actor Stephen Boyd had participated in with Charlton Heston

in *Ben-Hur*.¹⁸ It is only when Livius overhears Commodus' brutal threat to a sexually uncooperative young slave woman ("I'm Caesar's son, I could have you burned alive") that he seems to acquire for the first time any sense of Commodus' darker side. Marcus Aurelius' negative comments about his son had been relatively mild, but Lucilla's ominous prayer about the danger threatening Rome suggests something more sinister than merely Commodus' irresponsibility. Later, surrounded by his gladiators in battle, Commodus demonstrates a level of physical courage that appears close to foolhardiness.¹⁹ He and Livius then fall out over the latter's intended punishment of some of the gladiators who proved cowardly in the battle. They nearly kill each other in a ferocious if historically implausible chariot race that seems almost to be a necessity of the toga genre.²⁰

Once Commodus is firmly established in Rome as emperor we hear him proclaim, as he stands on a mosaic map of Italy, that he will "change everything" his father had done. He orders "double the taxes and twice as much grain" from the eastern provinces, whose governors inform him that there is already a famine and that such escalated exploitation would risk an uprising. This elicits brutal threats from Commodus, who declares that "they must forget the weakness of my father." Later, Lucilla tries to warn Commodus that his increased taxes are "pushing our eastern provinces to rebellion." Consistently cynical, Commodus suggests that her real reason for visiting Rome – following her father's wishes she has dutifully married the king of Armenia – is Livius' arrival there. He broadly hints that he can reunite the lovers: "Stay here with me. We'll find other ways to ensure the loyalty of Armenia." The murderous explosion of conflict in the chariot race is apparently forgotten when Livius comes to Rome to propose to the senate a piece of Marcus Aurelius' utopian political order. Commodus, full of smiles, tries to dissuade Livius from speaking to the senate, but Livius refuses. Commodus makes his sexual bribe more explicit: "Abandon this plan, and I will see to it that you and Lucilla can always be together." He then leads Livius to Lucilla. Ever virtuous, she urges Livius to pursue her father's dream whatever the personal cost.

¹⁸ This is noted by Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," 40–41, who also finds an echo of their first drunken collapse in their death embrace near the end of the film.

¹⁹ This pointedly contradicts Cassius Dio 73.1, who speaks of Commodus' "cowardice."

²⁰ Cf. the race in Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), almost gratuitous in plot terms, and the most famous of all filmed chariot races in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur*. The chariot race in Fred Niblo's 1925 version of *Ben-Hur* is still impressive.

The subsequent long senate scene, together with the earlier one of Marcus' address to the leaders of the empire, constitutes the core of the film's utopian appeal to its audience to rethink the imperialism of its own country and attests to director Anthony Mann's seriousness and courage in contributing to the political debates of his own time. The Cold War was still the day-to-day reality of most Americans. Indeed, for such a long scene of political debate to be effective, the audience must be presumed to be sufficiently anxious about their own empire to engage, consciously or unconsciously, in the necessary process of "translation" and apply an ostensibly past situation to the present. Marcus had envisioned extending Roman citizenship to the whole empire of free and equal nations. Livius' more modest proposal is to settle his newly conquered Germans as free peasant citizens on unused Roman land. While Commodus smirks on the sidelines, his creatures in the senate attack Livius' plan as un-Roman and traitorous. Livius, too, works through a surrogate, Greek philosopher Timonides, on the grounds that his victory in Germany might unduly sway the senate – a scruple it is hard to imagine any Roman ever feeling. But Mann seems at pains to avoid more direct conflict between Livius and Commodus until the film's climax.

The debate gives the impression that all the relevant arguments on both sides have been laid out. First we hear a spokesman for the emperor denounce Livius' proposal to free the newly conquered Germans, give them Roman citizenship, and settle them on abandoned Roman land. We ought to consider whether this is a neutral or irrelevant issue for politically conscious Americans in the early 1960s. Some people in the audience might remember that ten years before this film's release President Árbenz of Guatemala proposed settling landless peasants on unused land owned by the United Fruit Company. The CIA mounted an invasion and overthrew Árbenz, leading to a reign of terror that has only recently begun to show tentative signs of peaceful resolution.

Politically aware Americans in the audience might well remember that Castro, speaking to the United Nations, had made the issue of agrarian reform a central point in his indictment of American imperialism and had reminded his audience that Guatemala had earlier received the same ferocious response from the United States as Cuba. Reviewing the sources of conflict between revolutionary Cuba and the United States, Castro noted the first conflicts that arose from the new government's laws, which drastically cut rates charged by the American-owned telephone and electric companies:

Then followed the next law, an essential and inevitable law for our country, and a law which sooner or later will have to be adopted by all countries of the world, at least by those which have not yet adopted it: the Agrarian Reform Law. Of course, in theory everybody agrees with the Agrarian Reform Law. Nobody will deny the need for it unless he is a fool. No one can deny that agrarian reform is one of the essential conditions for the economic development of the country. In Cuba, even the big landowners agreed about the agrarian reform – only they wanted their own kind of reform . . . a reform which would not harm their interests . . . we made an agrarian reform . . . It was a reform . . . which was to solve the problems of the landless peasants, the problem of supplying basic foodstuffs, the problem of rural unemployment, and which was to end, once and for all, the ghastly poverty which existed in the countryside of our native land.

And that is where the first major difficulty arose. In the neighboring Republic of Guatemala a similar case had occurred. And I honestly warn my colleagues of Latin America, Africa and Asia: whenever you set out to make a just agrarian reform, you must be ready to face a similar situation, especially if the best and largest tracts of land are owned by American monopolies, as was the case in Cuba.

It is mainly because the issue of agrarian reform spoke – and still speaks – directly to the needs of the vast majority of humanity that Castro's words and deeds were frightening to the US government.

In the film *Senator Nigger*, the emperor's spokesman, defends the special nature of Roman citizenship and raises the senators' fear that generosity toward barbarians would only trigger similar demands throughout the empire, a Roman version of the domino theory that was already in the minds of those committed to the United States' full assumption of France's role in Vietnam. He concludes:

Let us rid our minds of this poisonous idea. Crucify their leaders. Sell the rest as slaves. Teach them once and for all what it is to make war on Rome.
That is the Roman way.

As the cheers die down, Livius requests that Timonides be allowed to speak. His surrogate is initially harassed with cries of "Greek!" and "Slave!" But he begins his appeal by picking up on the previous speaker's climactic use of the metaphor of "teaching" the enemies of Rome a lesson:

I'm a teacher, and as a teacher I know that when I teach the same lesson for a hundred times and still the pupil does not understand, then I'm forced to the conclusion that perhaps there is something wrong, either with the

lesson or with the teacher. A hundred times we have taught those we call barbarians what it means to make war on Rome. We've burned their villages, we've crucified their leaders, we have enslaved their young. The fires go out, the dead are buried, the slaves die – slowly – but the *hatred* that we leave behind us never dies. Hatred means wars. Wars mean tribute torn from our provinces, taxes, hunger, disease. How costly that is, how wasteful! But the answer is simple. We must have no war.

That fear of widespread hatred of the United States for its bullying tactics was strong in the early 1960s is suggested, for example, by the angry riots greeting Vice-President Richard Nixon's tour of Latin America in 1958 – especially in Caracas, Venezuela – and by the worldwide anti-American demonstrations following the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. But people aware of the history of US military interventions abroad – “from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli” – knew that these numbered far more than 100.²¹ Ironically, in the 1960 Presidential debate, when John F. Kennedy had called for US aid to “fighters for freedom” in Cuba, Richard Nixon, who knew that plans for an invasion were underway, felt compelled to argue “that such an act would be ‘dangerously irresponsible’ because it would violate US treaty commitments, probably cost the United States ‘all our friends in Latin America’ [and] lead to condemnation in the United Nations.”²² He spoke the truth.

At this point in the senate debate Commodus' henchman interrupts: “No war? When your friends continually attack us? This is treason. These people have proved their aims very clearly – to destroy us and to destroy the whole Roman way of life.” The rhetoric of defending one's way of life against less than fully human creatures bent on its destruction is pure Cold War cant, reflected in films perhaps nowhere more vividly than in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* (1956). But more obviously and explicitly political, for example, was the speech given in

²¹ The term “intervention” admits of a broad range of activities, not all explicitly military. Blum, *Killing Hope*, discusses fifty-five areas of the world in which the US military or the CIA have intervened since 1945. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov (eds.), *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), begin with the year 1811 and record many different sorts of interventions, including military ones. See also Lester D. Langley, *America and the Americas: The United States in the Western Hemisphere* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 104–132 (chapter entitled “New World Policeman”).

²² The first quotation is from Jane Franklin, *The Cuban Revolution and the United States: A Chronological History* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1992), 36; the second from Holden and Zolov, *Latin America*, 220–222, quoting Richard Nixon.

1954 by John C. Drier, the US representative to the Organization of American States. Seeking support for US intervention in Guatemala, he said:

Throughout the world the aggressive forces of Soviet Communism are exerting relentless pressure upon all free nations . . . Hundreds of millions of people in Europe and Asia have been pressed into the slavery of the Communist totalitarian state . . . I should like to emphasize the fact that the object of our concern, and the force against which we must take defensive measures, is an alien, non-American force . . . That it is rapidly making a victim of one American State increases our concern for that country and our determination to unite in a defense of all 21 of our American nations.²³

Similarly, John F. Kennedy in the widely viewed television debates with Richard Nixon had argued:

Are we moving in the direction of peace and security? Is our relative strength growing? . . . I don't believe that our relative strength is increasing . . . I look at Cuba, 90 miles off the coast of the United States . . . Our security depends on Latin America . . . Castro is only the beginning of our difficulties throughout Latin America. The big struggle will be to prevent the influence of Castro spreading to other countries – Mexico, Panama, Brazil, Bolivia, Columbia.²⁴

Timonides replies to the interruption: “And yet the answer is simple. Let us transform my friends from men of war to men of peace. Let us put them on our abandoned farm land. Not only will they produce food for themselves, but this I pledge you, one day they will send food to Rome.” This approach reflects one side of Kennedy's liberalism.²⁵ Shortly after his election he pledged twenty billion dollars in aid to Latin America under the aegis of the newly formed Alliance for Progress. A few months later he authorized the Bay of Pigs invasion.

At this point in the film a curiously anachronistic debate takes place over the profitability of slavery. “Yes, I agree,” shouts another supporter of the emperor. “Put them on those lands. Let them produce for us – but as slaves. That is the way it has always been.” Timonides now cites the example of Niger, whose name means “Black”:

²³ Quoted from Holden and Zolov, *Latin America and the United States*, 202–203.

²⁴ Quoted from Holden and Zolov, *Latin America and the United States*, 220–222.

²⁵ So rightly Martin M. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154, at 145.

Niger here used to have 20,000 slaves on his family estate. Where are they now? All sold or freed. Why? Because Niger is opposed to slavery? [*Laughter.*] No! Because it's no longer profitable to keep slaves. Slaves do not produce as much as free men. Let us do what is profitable and right. Let us share the greatest gift of all, let us give these men the rights of Roman freedom and they will spread the word that Rome has accepted them as equals. Then we will have our "human frontiers," the "Roman peace" that Marcus Aurelius promised.

With this climactic echo of Marcus Aurelius' speech Timonides finishes his appeal. It surely indicates the political views of the film's writers and director that this vision for Rome has been clinched with an argument about slavery, historically anachronistic as it is. In the second century AD slavery was still flourishing – indeed, such documentary evidence as we have suggests that the price of slaves had increased significantly.²⁶ At a time when capitalists in the northern United States were beginning to abandon the unionized north in quest of less free workers in the south, such words reflect Cold War rhetoric in which "slavery" stands for "communism" and Timonides' appeal expresses the United States' self-image as the supporter of freedom everywhere.²⁷ Moreover, for those who had grown up on the toga films of the 1950s it alludes to a favorite myth relentlessly propagated in those films: that Christianity was opposed to slavery.²⁸

Caesar's spokesman at this point objects in language calculated to mark him as the voice of America's own paranoid, militaristic, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic conservatives:

Equality. Freedom. Peace. Who is it that uses these words but Greeks and Jews and slaves? Behind him and his people are the Vandals, untold millions of them, waiting for a moment of weakness, ready to destroy us. If we take these barbarians in amongst us, our enemies will say it is because we are weak, and they will pour in on us from everywhere. It will be the end of the Roman Empire. It will be the end of Rome.

Now the title and true subject of the film are actualized, so to speak, in the intervention of an aged senator, played by an actor whose earlier

²⁶ Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 348–350.

²⁷ Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 135–139, date the wave of plant closings to the early 1970s, but the process had its roots earlier.

²⁸ See Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145–153 (chapter on Christianity and slavery).

roles as a patriarchal authority figure gives his voice additional weight.²⁹ He picks up the preceding speaker's final words:

The end of Rome? How does an empire die? Does it collapse in one terrible moment? No, no! But there comes a time when its people no longer believe in it. Then, then does an empire begin to die. . . . I have lived under four great emperors – Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius. During all those years our empire grew, changed. The law of life is: Grow or die. But you the senators are the heart of Rome, it is through you that the people speak. Speak up! Let the world hear you. Let the world know that Rome will not die. There are millions like them waiting at our gates. If we do not open these gates, they will break them down and destroy us. But instead, let us grow ever bigger, ever greater; let us take them among us, let the heart of the empire grow with us. Honorable Fathers, we have changed the world – can we not change ourselves?

We hear a shouts of assent – “Yes! It is time to change! An end to war!” – and the debate is over, an apparent triumph for Marcus Aurelius' vision.

Martin Winkler has commented on the senator's climactic speech: “He has something to say . . . to Americans regarding their own history and their contemporary situation” but does not spell out just what this says.³⁰ The speech assumes an obvious, self-explanatory connection between an imperial people believing in their empire, with the “law of life” being “Grow or die,” and the decision to welcome an enormous influx of new citizens into the existing body politic. The old senator's final rhetorical question acknowledges that such a decision entails a fundamental change – exactly what the previous speaker feared. Perhaps what is most striking about the senator's invocation of belief is its apparent gratuitousness in its immediate context.³¹ Certainly Commodus' mouthpiece and those who had shouted their approval for his perspective gave no hint of lack of faith in the traditional way of doing things. Rather, it is Marcus Aurelius and his converts Livius and Timonides who have articulated a lack of faith in the traditional Roman way of treating its allies and its enemies, who have called for a radical change from age-old methods that no longer command *their* belief. Given the heavily religious and often Christian associations of this aged actor, it seems to me that

²⁹ Cf. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 149.

³⁰ Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” 148.

³¹ On the subject of religious belief see Fitzgerald, “Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie,” 29–32.

the subtext of this patriarch's pontification about "belief" is the eventual triumph of Christianity, which decades of American toga movies had taught their audiences to have been the "real" cause of the fall of the Roman Empire.³²

The traditional logic of "Grow or die" in connection with the fate of empires points toward the necessity of new wars of conquest and seems to support the argument of Commodus' spokesman. Indeed it echoes the anxiety expressed by Kennedy in his debate with Nixon cited above: "Is our relative strength growing? . . . I don't believe that our relative strength is increasing." The same law is also the most concise statement of the inner logic of capitalism, an anachronistic concept suggested by the earlier disquisition on the superiority of free labor to slave labor. There is no such thing as steady-state capitalism: economists compulsively cite the rate of *growth* as the most important indicator of economic health. Moreover, there is a curious slippage here in the use of the metaphor of the body politic. The senate is the "heart" of Rome through which, in an unspecified way, the people speak. The new citizens will "let the heart of the empire grow" with them, but this heart now seems to be the expanded Roman people, not the senate through whom they allegedly speak.

One may well wonder how the American people can be expected to understand this kind of argumentation. On the one hand, they are invited to see the Roman senate as a metaphor for their own senate and by extension for the whole system of representative government, a vehicle capable of effecting meaningful transformations of fundamental social relations. They are offered a vague and ominous warning that they need to believe in the American empire if it is to survive. At the same time they are exhorted to change radically the character of their empire away from paranoia and xenophobia toward a more peaceful society and what today might be called a "multicultural" conception of its aims.

A brief subsequent view of the happy German community where Ballomar has a more modest haircut and a beautiful blond wife who works with him and Timonides at farm labor shows us that the utopian plan laid out in the senate is workable. The community is prospering,

³² I say this despite Mann's explicit statement in "Empire Demolition," reprinted in this volume, that he wanted to avoid focusing on Christianity. While the film does avoid explicit appeals to the issue of Christianity, the choice of an actor who had played St. Peter and Balthazar is more loaded than Winkler seemed willing to acknowledge. The Christian cross on the chest of the murdered (martyred?) Timonides suggests that Mann could not resist a broad hint that Christianity represented the inevitable long-term replacement for Marcus Aurelius' utopian dream.

and a wagon full of bread is later delivered to a starving Rome. All this demonstrates the fulfillment of Timonides' promise to the senate that these barbarians, if given freedom and land, would one day send food to Rome.

The triumph of the dark side comes with civil war and the wholesale slaughter of this community. Livius' victory in the senate leads to his military demotion and virtual exile to the northern frontier, while Lucilla is sent off to her husband in Armenia. Commodus' brutal economic extortion continues. The whole Eastern empire, including Armenia, rebels. When the eastern Roman army joins the rebellion, Commodus in desperation recalls Livius and pleads with him to save the empire by crushing the rebels. Livius ominously warns Commodus: "Do not give me this power," but he is sufficiently traditional at this point to find rebellion against the empire unacceptable whatever its cause. He takes his northern army to the East and confronts his former friends, the Roman commanders of the rebellion. They prepare to fight. But King Sohamus, Lucilla's husband, has secretly invited the participation of the hated Persians, the ancient stand-in for the Soviets. The Persian menace triggers the deeper patriotism of the Roman leaders of the rebellion, who throw in their lot with Livius and together defeat the Persians. Having achieved victory over the Persians and reintegrated the Roman rebels in his army, Livius encounters messengers from Commodus, who congratulate him and offer him joint leadership of the empire. But the brutality of the retribution that Commodus orders leads Livius himself to rebel. Commodus demands five thousand people in every eastern city to be crucified, five thousand to be burned alive. This is demographically implausible but all too credible, given the realities of twentieth-century warfare. Livius sends Commodus' envoys back to Rome locked in a cage. The infuriated emperor immediately orders his toady Cleander to gather as much gold as possible to keep the people on his side, and he commands the slaughter of the utopian German community.

Livius and Lucilla return to Rome, bent on overthrowing Commodus, but Livius, ever the conservative patriot, is loathe to march directly on Rome. He heads alone into the city to reason with Commodus, leaving orders for an invasion if he does not return. Commodus refuses Livius' offer to secure his personal safety if he will abdicate. Livius again has recourse to the senate, but now abject toadies fill its ranks. Livius is arrested while Lucilla is waiting at the outskirts of Rome with the army. Commodus' agents arrive and announce that Commodus is their new commander and that they are bringing money for every soldier. In the Forum Livius is sentenced to burn next to Ballomar and his wife, people

we assumed had perished along with Timonides. Outside the city gates chaos ensues as all the soldiers rush to get their share of the gold. Commodus' agent declares triumphantly to Lucilla: "There's your great Roman army – bought for a handful of gold." Victorinus, one of the army commanders who seemed most devoted to Livius, rushes to get his share of the gold. Soon after, holding a helmet full of gold coins, he turns to the horrified Lucilla and offers the only serious hint in the film of the economics of empire: "You don't understand all this . . . In the old days there was gold from the wars for the legionnaires, but your father – he was a great man, but with this new Rome, it's all changed." Economics was a major factor in Rome's imperial expansion from its earliest period.³³ So it is for all empires. The moment discussed is a telling hint, if the only one in this film, at what greed for gold as a motive for empire beyond border defense leads to.³⁴

In the Forum Commodus challenges Livius to a duel but is killed. Livius' victory leaves him in a position of military power that could easily turn into supreme political power as well. Victorinus, on a platform with a group of senators, cries out: "Hail Livius! Hail Caesar!" Ever the opportunist, he continues: "We're in command now, Livius. . . Take the throne." Niger, too, declares solemnly: "Gaius Metellus Livius, the people are asking for you." Another adds: "The empire is yours, Livius." But Livius replies: "You would not find me suitable, because my first official act would be to have you all crucified." As he and Lucilla slowly descend the stairs to walk away from power and empire, senators and military leaders begin bidding for the throne of Rome. A solemn voiceover now tells us: "This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire. A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

This final warning recalls the aged senator's invocation of the importance of belief as the quintessential inner character of a civilization and, in its immediate context, points to the combination of greed with brutality as the chief causes of decline and fall. The earlier portrayal of mindlessly dancing masses – "They do not see; they do not hear," Lucilla comments in a voiceover – implies a scorn of the people that cancels out

³³ In general see William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in the Roman Republic, 327–70 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979; rpt. 2006), and the discussion summarized in Craig B. Champion (ed.), *Roman Imperialism: Readings and Sources* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 17–67.

³⁴ Winkler, "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 144, sees the emphasis on borders in a positive light: "imperial power depends on military power, and military power resides on the borders of the empire – an unobtrusive lesson in imperial Roman history."

any hope of a democratic alternative. The film's abbreviated account of Roman greed mutes any criticism of capitalism and omits the economic aspect of Roman imperialism. Commodus' greed was, after all, only to pay for bread and circuses for the proletariat of the metropolis and to buy off the army when threatened with a revolution. But it was to the greed of US corporations that Castro had attributed the sufferings brought about by American imperialism, specifically its preference for military-backed tyrannies.

The Fall of the Roman Empire well illustrates the principle that art does not simply reflect political and economic developments but offers a creative response and often seeks – futilely in most cases – to shape future realities. The raw material, as it were, for the film's utopian vision of the peaceful transformation of a vast empire built mostly on bloody conquest into a more or less friendly family of nations with formally equal sovereignty was the break-up of the British empire after World War II. The United Nations was full of former British colonies. But a different procedure, one that resembled Commodus' in this film, was also in evidence in the post-war period. Che Guevara's speech at Punta del Este in 1961, when the United States unveiled its Alliance for Progress as a vehicle for peacefully undercutting the appeal of the Cuban revolution after military intervention had failed in the Bay of Pigs, offered a picture of US imperialism as the fountainhead of western imperialism in general and an overview of a world on the brink of destroying itself. As we now know, in every case where the United States was directly or indirectly involved, military repression was the alternative chosen to preserve the empire. The film thus contains, not only in its title, a pointed expression of anxiety over the long-term consequences of the United States' commitment to Commodus' way of dealing with imperial power and a poignantly failed invitation to consider an alternative path, one that today seems even more remote.

I have concentrated in the foregoing on the politics of empire that are a central focus of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The narrative frame, however, which invites the audience to empathize with the good side in this politics, is a fictional love story with its own sort of politics. At least since the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, the term "politics" has spread to cover a multiplicity of phenomena, based on the recognition that relations of power are pervasive in virtually all human relationships.³⁵ If the politics of empire in Mann's film are strikingly progressive in relation to the toga films that preceded it, its sexual politics as the

³⁵ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (1971; rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

primary vehicle for that progressive message are strikingly backward. A great actress like Sophia Loren is wasted in her role as a one-dimensional dutiful daughter, whose only apparent conflict is between her loyalty to her father's wishes and her love for the male lead. The inevitable obstacle to this love arises in the form of Marcus' announcement that Lucilla must marry the king of Armenia. As the Cold War era must have it: "The east is where our danger lies." Lucilla's protest to her father is too mild: "I know that you love me. Therefore, if you ask, it can only be that you tried with all your strength to find another way . . . Therefore it must be done." The traditional cruelty of using women as pawns in aristocratic and imperial politics is blatant.³⁶ And all the love scenes between Lucilla and Livius are embarrassing. The characterization of Lucilla as a woman defined by her subservience to two males, whose only self-assertion occurs in the context of a conflict between the demands of these males, is hardly a progressive political statement. Rather, it seems to conform to much of ancient women's experiences, who were first under their father's and then under their husbands' authority. Moreover, the resolution of the film's central conflict and of their love entails a simple, literally regressive embracing of the private sphere and complete abandonment of the public sphere.³⁷

It is sometimes argued that films set in ancient Greece or Rome are excellent vehicles for teaching students about classical antiquity.³⁸ Such an approach, when supplemented by study of the relevant ancient sources on which a film like *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is based, can certainly engage students in the complex process by which we reconstruct the supposed truth of "what really happened." But teachers also have the responsibility to engage students in the process of understanding how such a film's contemporary culture, especially in terms of politics and ideology, shapes the portrayal of the past.

³⁶ On this see Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3–61.

³⁷ Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," 32–34, considers this a general characteristic of toga films.

³⁸ On this, if from a different perspective (Greek myth rather than Roman history) cf. my "Teaching Classical Myth and Confronting Contemporary Myths," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 291–318.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Excerpts from Edward Gibbon

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following excerpts from Chapters III and IV on Marcus Aurelius and from Chapter V on the accession of Didius Julianus in the first volume of Edward Gibbon's monumental work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, originally published in 1776, are here taken from volume 1 of the seven-volume edition by J. B. Bury of 1896–1900. Gibbon's footnotes and marginal section headings and Bury's notes have been omitted. Spelling and punctuation have been somewhat modified.

1. Marcus Aurelius and His Time

The two Antonines (for it is of them that we are now speaking) governed the Roman world forty-two years with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue. Although Pius had two sons, he preferred the welfare of Rome to the interest of his family, gave his daughter Faustina in marriage to young Marcus, obtained from the senate the tribunitian and proconsular powers, and, with a noble disdain, or rather ignorance, of jealousy, associated him to all the labours of government. Marcus, on the other hand, revered the character of his benefactor, loved him as a parent, obeyed him as his sovereign, and, after he was no more, regu-

lated his own administration by the example and maxims of his predecessor. Their united reigns are possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government.

Titus Antoninus Pius has been justly denominated a second Numa. The same love of religion, justice, and peace was the distinguishing characteristic of both princes. But the situation of the latter opened a much larger field for the exercise of those virtues. Numa could only prevent a few neighbouring villages from plundering each other's harvests. Antoninus diffused order and tranquillity over the greatest part of the earth. His reign is marked by the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history; which is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind. In private life he was an amiable as well as a good man. The native simplicity of his virtue was a stranger to vanity or affectation. He enjoyed with moderation the conveniences of his fortune and the innocent pleasures of society, and the benevolence of his soul displayed itself in a cheerful serenity of temper.

The virtue of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was of a severer and more laborious kind. It was the well-earned harvest of many a learned conference, of many a patient lecture, and many a midnight lucubration. At the age of twelve years he embraced the rigid system of the Stoics, which taught him to submit his body to his mind, his passions to his reason; to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, all things external as things indifferent. His meditations, composed in the tumult of a camp, are still extant; and he even condescended to give lessons on philosophy in a more public manner than was perhaps consistent with the modesty of a sage or the dignity of an emperor. But his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others, just and beneficent to all mankind. He regretted that Avidius Cassius, who excited a rebellion in Syria, had disappointed him, by a voluntary death, of the pleasure of converting an enemy into a friend, and he justified the sincerity of that sentiment by moderating the zeal of the senate against the adherents of the traitor. War he detested as the disgrace and calamity of human nature; but when the necessity of a just defence called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the weakness of his constitution. His memory was revered by a grateful posterity, and above a century after his death many persons preserved the image of Marcus Antoninus among those of their household gods.

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous,

he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the republic, had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom.

The labours of these monarchs were overpaid by the immense reward that inseparably waited on their success, by the honest pride of virtue, and by the exquisite delight of beholding the general happiness of which they were the authors. A just but melancholy reflection embittered, however, the noblest of human enjoyments. They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power which they had exerted for the benefit of their people. The ideal restraints of the senate and the laws might serve to display the virtues, but could never correct the vices, of the emperor. The military force was a blind and irresistible instrument of oppression, and the corruption of Roman manners would always supply flatterers eager to applaud, and ministers prepared to serve, the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty, of their masters.

These gloomy apprehensions had been already justified by the experience of the Romans. The annals of the emperors exhibit a strong and various picture of human nature, which we should vainly seek among the mixed and doubtful characters of modern history. In the conduct of those monarchs we may trace the utmost lines of vice and virtue, the most exalted perfection and the meanest degeneracy of our own species. The golden age of Trajan and the Antonines had been preceded by an age of iron. It is almost superfluous to enumerate the unworthy successors of Augustus. Their unparalleled vices and the splendid theatre on which they were acted have saved them from oblivion. The dark unrelenting Tiberius, the furious Caligula, the feeble Claudius, the profligate and cruel Nero, the beastly Vitellius, and the timid inhuman Domitian are condemned to everlasting infamy. During fourscore years (excepting only the short and doubtful respite of Vespasian's reign), Rome groaned beneath an unremitting tyranny, which exterminated the ancient fami-

lies of the republic and was fatal to almost every virtue and every talent that arose in that unhappy period.

The mildness of Marcus, which the rigid discipline of the Stoics was unable to eradicate, formed, at the same time, the most amiable, and the only defective, part of his character. His excellent understanding was often deceived by the unsuspecting goodness of his heart. Artful men, who study the passions of princes and conceal their own, approached his person in the disguise of philosophic sanctity and acquired riches and honours by affecting to despise them. His excessive indulgence to his brother, his wife, and his son exceeded the bounds of private virtue, and became a public injury, by the example and consequences of their vices.

Faustina, the daughter of Pius and the wife of Marcus, has been as much celebrated for her gallantries as for her beauty. The grave simplicity of the philosopher was ill calculated to engage her wanton levity or to fix that unbounded passion for variety which often discovered personal merit in the meanest of mankind. The Cupid of the ancients was, in general, a very sensual deity, and the amours of an empress, as they exact on her side the plainest advances, are seldom susceptible of much sentimental delicacy. Marcus was the only man in the empire who seemed ignorant or insensible of the irregularities of Faustina; which, according to the prejudices of every age, reflected some disgrace on the injured husband. He promoted several of her lovers to posts of honour and profit and during a connection of thirty years invariably gave her proofs of the most tender confidence and of a respect which ended not with her life. In his *Meditations* he thanks the gods, who had bestowed on him a wife so faithful, so gentle, and of such a wonderful simplicity of manners. The obsequious senate, at his earnest request, declared her a goddess. She was represented in her temples with the attributes of Juno, Venus, and Ceres, and it was decreed that on the day of their nuptials the youth of either sex should pay their vows before the altar of their chaste patroness.

The monstrous vices of the son have cast a shade on the purity of the father's virtues. It has been objected to Marcus that he sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy and that he chose a successor in his own family rather than in the republic. Nothing, however, was neglected by the anxious father, and by the men of virtue and learning whom he summoned to his assistance, to expand the narrow mind of young Commodus, to correct his growing vices, and to render him worthy of the throne for which he was designed. But the power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy except in those happy

dispositions where it is almost superfluous. The distasteful lesson of a grave philosopher was in a moment obliterated by the whisper of a profligate favourite, and Marcus himself blasted the fruits of this laboured education by admitting his son, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, to a full participation of the Imperial power. He lived but four years afterwards, but he lived long enough to repent a rash measure, which raised the impetuous youth above the restraint of reason and authority.

Most of the crimes which disturb the internal peace of society are produced by the restraints which the necessary but unequal laws of property have imposed on the appetites of mankind, by confining to a few the possession of those objects that are coveted by many. Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is of the most imperious and unsociable nature, since the pride of one man requires the submission of the multitude. In the tumult of civil discord the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by those of humanity. The ardour of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries, and the fear of future dangers, all contribute to inflame the mind and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood, but these motives will not account for the unprovoked cruelties of Commodus, who had nothing to wish and everything to enjoy. The beloved son of Marcus succeeded to his father amidst the acclamations of the senate and armies, and when he ascended the throne the happy youth saw round him neither competitor to remove nor enemies to punish. In this calm elevated station it was surely natural that he should prefer the love of mankind to their detestation, the mild glories of his five predecessors to the ignominious fate of Nero and Domitian.

2. The Auction of the Empire

The power of the sword is more sensibly felt in an extensive monarchy than in a small community. It has been calculated by the ablest politicians that no state, without being soon exhausted, can maintain above the hundredth part of its members in arms and idleness. But although this relative proportion may be uniform, its influence over the rest of the society will vary according to the degree of its positive strength. The advantages of military science and discipline cannot be exerted, unless a proper number of soldiers are united into one body, and actuated by one soul. With a handful of men, such an union would be ineffectual; with an unwieldy host, it would be impracticable; and the powers of the

machine would be alike destroyed by the extreme minuteness or the excessive weight of its springs. To illustrate this observation we need only reflect that there is no superiority of natural strength, artificial weapons, or acquired skill which could enable one man to keep in constant subjection one hundred of his fellow-creatures: the tyrant of a single town or a small district would soon discover that an hundred armed followers were a weak defence against ten thousand peasants or citizens, but an hundred thousand well-disciplined soldiers will command, with despotic sway, ten millions of subjects, and a body of ten or fifteen thousand guards will strike terror into the most numerous populace that ever crowded the streets of an immense capital.

The Praetorian bands, whose licentious fury was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman empire, scarcely amounted to the last-mentioned number. They derived their institution from Augustus. That crafty tyrant, sensible that laws might colour, but that arms alone could maintain, his usurped dominion, had gradually formed this powerful body of guards in constant readiness to protect his person, to awe the senate, and either to prevent or to crush the first motions of rebellion. He distinguished these favoured troops by a double pay and superior privileges; but, as their formidable aspect would at once have alarmed and irritated the Roman people, three cohorts only were stationed in the capital whilst the remainder was dispersed in the adjacent towns of Italy. But after fifty years of peace and servitude Tiberius ventured on a decisive measure, which for ever riveted the fetters of his country. Under the fair pretences of relieving Italy from the heavy burden of military quarters and of introducing a stricter discipline among the guards, he assembled them at Rome in a permanent camp, which was fortified with skilful care, and placed on a commanding situation.

Such formidable servants are always necessary, but often fatal, to the throne of despotism. By thus introducing the Praetorian guards, as it were, into the palace and the senate, the emperors taught them to perceive their own strength and the weakness of the civil government, to view the vices of their masters with familiar contempt, and to lay aside that reverential awe which distance only and mystery can preserve towards an imaginary power. In the luxurious idleness of an opulent city their pride was nourished by the sense of their irresistible weight, nor was it possible to conceal from them that the person of the sovereign, the authority of the senate, the public treasure, and the seat of empire were all in their hands. To divert the Praetorian bands from these dangerous reflections, the firmest and best established princes were obliged to mix blandishments with commands, rewards with punishments, to flatter

their pride, indulge their pleasures, connive at their irregularities, and to purchase their precarious faith by a liberal donative which, since the elevation of Claudius, was exacted as a legal claim on the accession of every new emperor.

The advocates of the guards endeavoured to justify by arguments the power which they asserted by arms and to maintain that, according to the purest principles of the constitution, their consent was essentially necessary in the appointment of an emperor. The election of consuls, of generals, and of magistrates, however it had been recently usurped by the senate, was the ancient and undoubted right of the Roman people. But where was the Roman people to be found? Not surely amongst the mixed multitude of slaves and strangers that filled the streets of Rome, a servile populace as devoid of spirit as destitute of property. The defenders of the state, selected from the flower of Italian youth and trained in the exercise of arms and virtue, were the genuine representatives of the people and the best entitled to elect the military chief of the republic. These assertions, however defective in reason, became unanswerable when the fierce Praetorians increased their weight by throwing, like the barbarian conqueror of Rome, their swords into the scale.

The Praetorians had violated the sanctity of the throne by the atrocious murder of Pertinax; they dishonoured the majesty of it by their subsequent conduct. The camp was without a leader, for even the Prefect Laetus, who had excited the tempest, prudently declined the public indignation. Amidst the wild disorder Sulpicianus, the emperor's father-in-law and governor of the city, who had been sent to the camp on the first alarm of mutiny, was endeavouring to calm the fury of the multitude when he was silenced by the clamorous return of the murderers, bearing on a lance the head of Pertinax. Though history has accustomed us to observe every principle and every passion yielding to the imperious dictates of ambition, it is scarcely credible that in these moments of horror Sulpicianus should have aspired to ascend a throne polluted with the recent blood of so near a relation and so excellent a prince. He had already begun to use the only effectual argument and to treat for the Imperial dignity; but the more prudent of the Praetorians, apprehensive that in this private contract they should not obtain a just price for so valuable a commodity, ran out upon the ramparts and, with a loud voice, proclaimed that the Roman world was to be disposed of to the best bidder by public auction.

This infamous offer, the most insolent excess of military licence, diffused an universal grief, shame, and indignation throughout the city. It

reached at length the ears of Didius Julianus, a wealthy senator, who, regardless of the public calamities, was indulging himself in the luxury of the table. His wife and his daughter, his freedmen and his parasites easily convinced him that he deserved the throne and earnestly conjured him to embrace so fortunate an opportunity. The vain old man hastened to the Praetorian camp, where Sulpicianus was still in treaty with the guards, and began to bid against him from the foot of the rampart. The unworthy negotiation was transacted by faithful emissaries, who passed alternately from one candidate to the other and acquainted each of them with the offers of his rival. Sulpicianus had already promised a donative of five thousand drachms (above one hundred and sixty pounds) to each soldier when Julian, eager for the prize, rose at once to the sum of six thousand two hundred and fifty drachms, or upwards of two hundred pounds sterling. The gates of the camp were instantly thrown open to the purchaser, he was declared emperor and received an oath of allegiance from the soldiers, who retained humanity enough to stipulate that he should pardon and forget the competition of Sulpicianus.

It was now incumbent on the Praetorians to fulfil the conditions of the sale. They placed their new sovereign, whom they served and despised, in the centre of their ranks, surrounded him on every side with their shields, and conducted him in close order of battle through the deserted streets of the city. The senate was commanded to assemble, and those who had been the distinguished friends of Pertinax or the personal enemies of Julian found it necessary to affect a more than common share of satisfaction at this happy revolution. After Julian had filled the senate house with armed soldiers, he expatiated on the freedom of his election, his own eminent virtues, and his full assurance of the affections of the senate. The obsequious assembly congratulated their own and the public felicity, engaged their allegiance, and conferred on him all the several branches of the Imperial power. From the senate Julian was conducted by the same military procession to take possession of the palace. The first objects which struck his eyes were the abandoned trunk of Pertinax and the frugal entertainment prepared for his supper. The one he viewed with indifference, the other with contempt. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he amused himself till a very late hour with dice and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer. Yet it was observed that, after the crowd of flatterers dispersed and left him to darkness, solitude, and terrible reflection, he passed a sleepless night, revolving most probably in his mind his own rash folly, the fate of his virtuous predecessor, and the doubtful and dangerous tenure of an empire which had not been acquired by merit but purchased by money.

He had reason to tremble. On the throne of the world he found himself without a friend and even without an adherent. The guards themselves were ashamed of the prince whom their avarice had persuaded them to accept, nor was there a citizen who did not consider his elevation with horror as the last insult on the Roman name. The nobility, whose conspicuous station and ample possessions exacted the strictest caution, dissembled their sentiments and met the affected civility of the emperor with smiles of complacency and professions of duty. But the people, secure in their numbers and obscurity, gave a free vent to their passions. The streets and public places of Rome resounded with clamours and imprecations. The enraged multitude affronted the person of Julian, rejected his liberality, and, conscious of the impotence of their own resentment, they called aloud on the legions of the frontiers to assert the violated majesty of the Roman empire.

The public discontent was soon diffused from the centre to the frontiers of the empire. The armies of Britain, of Syria, and of Illyricum lamented the death of Pertinax, in whose company or under whose command they had so often fought and conquered. They received with surprise, with indignation, and perhaps with envy the extraordinary intelligence that the Praetorians had disposed of the empire by public auction, and they sternly refused to ratify the ignominious bargain. Their immediate and unanimous revolt was fatal to Julian, but it was fatal at the same time to the public peace; as the generals of the respective armies, Clodius Albinus, Pescennius Niger, and Septimius Severus, were still more anxious to succeed than to revenge the murdered Pertinax. Their forces were exactly balanced. Each of them was at the head of three legions, with a numerous train of auxiliaries, and, however different in their characters, they were all soldiers of experience and capacity.

The Chief Ancient Sources on Marcus Aurelius

1. Cassius Dio

EDITOR'S NOTE: Greek historian Cassius Dio (c. AD 163–c. 235) came to Rome as a young man, was a Roman senator under Commodus, and twice held the consulship. He wrote a *Roman History* in eighty books, from the arrival of Aeneas down to his own time. The following excerpts are from the epitome by Xiphilinus of Dio's Books 71 and 72 (70 and 71), taken from *Dio's Roman History*, tr. Earnest Cary, vol. 9 (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1927), 3–69. Translator's annotations have been omitted. Editor's additions appear in [].

1. Book 71 (70). 1–3.1

MARCUS ANTONINUS, the philosopher, upon obtaining the throne at the death of Antoninus, his adoptive father, had immediately taken to share his power with Lucius Verus, the son of Lucius Commodus. For he was frail in body himself and devoted the greater part of his time to letters. Indeed it is reported that even when he was emperor he showed no shame or hesitation about resorting to a teacher, but became a pupil of Sextus, the Boeotian philosopher, and did not hesitate to attend the

lectures of Hermogenes on rhetoric; but he was most inclined to the doctrines of the Stoic school. Lucius, on the other hand, was a vigorous man of younger years and better suited for military enterprises. Therefore Marcus made him his son-in-law by marrying him to his daughter Lucilla and sent him to conduct the war against the Parthians . . . Lucius gloried in these exploits and took great pride in them, yet his extreme good fortune did him no good; for he is said to have engaged in a plot later against his father-in-law Marcus and to have perished by poison before he could carry out any of his plans . . .

2. *Book 72 (71).* 3.1, 3.5, 6, 13, 8, 10, 15–17, 22.2—33, 19–20, 33–36

The emperor himself fought for a long time, in fact, almost his entire life, one might say, with the barbarians in the region of the Ister [Danube], with both the Iazyges and the Marcomani, one after the other, using Pannonia as his base . . . When the Marcomani were successful in a certain battle and slew Marcus Vindex, the prefect, the emperor erected three statues in his honour; and after conquering the foe he himself received the title of Germanicus (for we give the name of Germans to those who dwell in the northern regions) . . .

The emperor, as often as he had leisure from war, would hold court; he used to allow abundant time to the speakers, and entered into the preliminary inquiries and examinations at great length, so as to ensure strict justice by every possible means. In consequence, he would often be trying the same case for as much as eleven or twelve days, even though he sometimes held court at night. For he was industrious and applied himself diligently to all the duties of his office; and he neither said, wrote, nor did anything as if it were a minor matter, but sometimes he would consume whole days over the minutest point, not thinking it right that the emperor should do anything hurriedly. For he believed that if he should slight even the smallest detail, this would bring reproach upon all his other actions. Yet he was so frail in body that at first he could not endure the cold, but even after the soldiers had assembled at his command he would retire before addressing a word to them; and he took but very little food and that always at night. It was never his practice to eat during the daytime, unless it were some of the drug called theriac [antidote to poison, panacea]. This drug he took, not so much because he feared anything, as because his stomach and chest were in bad condition; and it is reported that this practice enabled him to endure both this and other maladies.

Envoys were sent to Marcus by the Iazyges to request peace, but they did not obtain anything. For Marcus, both because he knew their race to be untrustworthy and also because he had been deceived by the Quadi, wished to annihilate them utterly. For the Quadi had not only fought on the side of the Iazyges at this time, but on an earlier occasion, too, had received in their own and any Marcomanian fugitives who were hard pressed while that tribe was still at war with the Romans. Moreover, they were not carrying out any of their agreements; in particular, they had not restored all the captives, but only a few, and these such as they could neither sell nor employ at any labour. Or, if they ever did give up any of those who were in good physical condition, they would keep their relatives back in order that the men given up might desert again to rejoin these. They also expelled their king Furtius, and on their own responsibility made Ariogaesus their king instead. In consequence, the emperor neither recognized Ariogaesus as their legally constituted king nor renewed the treaty of peace, though they promised to give up fifty thousand captives if he would do so.

Against Ariogaesus Marcus was so bitter that he issued a proclamation to the effect that anyone who brought him in alive should receive a thousand gold pieces, and anyone who slew him and exhibited his head, five hundred. Yet in general the emperor was always accustomed to treat even his most stubborn foes humanely . . . nevertheless, when the man was later captured, he did him no harm, but merely sent him off to Alexandria.

So Marcus subdued the Marcomani and the Iazyges after many hard struggles and dangers. A great war against the people called the Quadi also fell to his lot and it was his good fortune to win an unexpected victory, or rather it was vouchsafed him by Heaven. For when the Romans were in peril in the course of the battle, the divine power saved them in a most unexpected manner. The Quadi had surrounded them at a spot favourable for their purpose and the Romans were fighting valiantly with their shields locked together; then the barbarians ceased fighting, expecting to capture them easily as the result of the heat and their thirst. So they posted guards all about and hemmed them in to prevent their getting water anywhere; for the barbarians were far superior in numbers. The Romans, accordingly, were in a terrible plight from fatigue, wounds, the heat of the sun, and thirst, and so could neither fight nor retreat, but were standing in the line and at their several posts, scorched by the heat, when suddenly many clouds gathered and a mighty rain, not without divine interposition, burst upon them. Indeed, there is a story to the effect that Arnuphis, an Egyptian magician, who

was a companion of Marcus, had invoked by means of enchantments various deities and in particular Mercury, the god of the air, and by this means attracted the rain . . . when the rain poured down, at first all turned their faces upwards and received the water in their mouths; then some held out their shields and some their helmets to catch it, and they not only took deep draughts themselves but also gave their horses to drink. And when the barbarians now charged upon them, they drank and fought at the same time; and some, becoming wounded, actually gulped down the blood that flowed into their helmets, along with the water. So intent, indeed, were most of them on drinking that they would have suffered severely from the enemy's onset, had not a violent hail-storm and numerous thunderbolts fallen upon the ranks of the foe. Thus in one and the same place one might have beheld water and fire descending from the sky simultaneously; so that while those on the one side were being drenched and drinking, the others were being consumed by fire and dying; and while the fire, on the one hand, did not touch the Romans, but, if it fell anywhere among them, was immediately extinguished, the shower, on the other hand, did the barbarians no good, but, like so much oil, actually fed the flames that were consuming them, and they had to search for water even while being drenched with rain. Some wounded themselves in order to quench the fire with their blood, and others rushed over to the side of the Romans, convinced that they alone had the saving water; in any case Marcus took pity on them. He was now saluted *imperator* [emperor] by the soldiers, for the seventh time; and although he was not wont to accept any such honour before the senate voted it, nevertheless this time he took it as a gift from Heaven, and he sent a despatch to the senate . . .

When the Marcomani sent envoys to him, Marcus, in view of the fact that they had fulfilled all the conditions imposed of them, albeit grudgingly and reluctantly, restored to them one-half of the neutral zone along their frontier, so that they might now settle to within a distance of five miles from the Ister; and he established the places and the days for their trading together (for these had not been previously fixed) and exchanged hostages with them.

The Iazyges were defeated and came to terms . . . and made the same compact as that to which the Quadi and the Marcomani had agreed, except that they were required to dwell twice as far away from the Ister as those tribes. Indeed, the emperor had wished to exterminate them utterly. For that they were still strong at this time and had done the Romans great harm was evident from the fact that they returned a hundred thousand captives that were still in their hands even after the

many who had been sold, had died, or had escaped, and that they promptly furnished as their contribution to the alliance eight thousand cavalry, fifty-five hundred of whom he sent to Britain.

The revolt of Cassius and Syria forced Marcus Antoninus to make terms with the Iazyges very much against his will; indeed, he was so alarmed by the news that he did not even communicate to the senate the conditions of the peace made with them, as he was wont to do in other cases.

When Cassius rebelled in Syria, Marcus in great alarm summoned his son Commodus from Rome, as being now entitled to assume the *toga virilis* [toga of manhood]. Cassius, who was a Syrian from Cyrrhus, had shown himself an excellent man and the sort one would desire to have as an emperor, save for the fact that he was the son of one Heliodorus, who had been content to secure the governorship of Egypt as the reward of his oratorical ability. But Cassius in rebelling made a terrible mistake, due to his having been deceived by [Marcus' wife] Faustina. The latter, who was the daughter of Antoninus Pius, seeing that her husband had fallen ill and expecting that he would die at any moment, was afraid that the throne might fall to some outsider, inasmuch as Commodus was both too young and also rather simple-minded, and that she might thus find herself reduced to a private station. Therefore she secretly induced Cassius to make his preparations so that, if anything should happen to Antoninus, he might obtain both her and the imperial power. Now while he was considering this project, a message came that Marcus was dead (in such circumstances reports always represent matters as worse than they really are), and immediately, without waiting to confirm the rumour, he laid claim to the throne, on the ground that he had already been elected by the soldiers who were then in Pannonia. And in spite of the fact that he learned the whole truth before long, nevertheless, having once made a beginning, he did not change his course, but speedily won over the whole region south of the Taurus [Mountains] and was making preparations to gain the throne by war. Marcus, on being informed of his uprising by Verus, the governor of Cappadocia, concealed the news for a time; but as the soldiers were becoming greatly disturbed by the reports and were talking a great deal, he called them together and read an address to the following purport:

“Fellow-soldiers: I have come before you, not to express indignation, but to bewail my fate. For why become angry at Heaven, which is all-powerful? But it is necessary, perhaps, for those who meet with undeserved misfortune to indulge in lamentations; and that is now my case. Is it not dreadful that we become engaged in war after war? Is it not

horrible that we are even involved in civil war? And are not both these evils surpassed in dreadfulness and horror by the discovery that there is no such thing as loyalty among men? For a plot has been formed against me by my dearest friend and I have been forced into a conflict against my will, though I have done nothing wrong or amiss. What virtue, what friendship shall henceforth be deemed secure after this experience of mine? Has not faith, has not confident hope perished? Now if the danger were mine alone, I should have regarded the matter as of no moment (for I presume I was not born to be immortal!), but since there has been a public secession, or rather rebellion, and the war touches us all alike, I could have wished, had it been possible, to invite Cassius here and to argue before you or the senate the matter at issue between us; and I would gladly have yielded the supreme power to him without a struggle, if this had seemed to be for the good of the State. For it is on behalf of the State that I continue to toil and to undergo dangers and that I have spent so much time here outside of Italy, though already an old man and weak, unable to take either food without pain or sleep without anxiety.

“But since Cassius would never consent to adopt this course, – for how could he trust me after having shown himself so untrustworthy toward me? – you, at least, fellow-soldiers, ought to be of good cheer. For surely Cilicians, Syrians, Jews, and Egyptians have never proved superior to you and never will, even if they should muster as many tens of thousands more than you as they now muster fewer. Nor would even Cassius himself appear to deserve any consideration now, however much he may seem to possess high qualities of generalship or however many successes he may seem to have gained. For an eagle is not formidable when in command of an army of daws nor a lion when in command of fawns; and as for those Arabian and Parthian wars, it was not Cassius, but you, that brought them to an end. Again, even though he is renowned because of his achievements against the Parthians, yet you have Verus, who has been no less successful than he, but, on the contrary, more successful, in winning many victories and in acquiring much territory. But Cassius has perhaps already changed his mind on hearing that I am alive; for surely he has done this thing on no other assumption than that I was dead. But even if he persists in his course, yet when he learns that we are approaching, he will surely think better of it, both out of fear of you and out of respect for me.

“There is only one thing I fear, fellow-soldiers – for you shall be told the whole truth – and that is, that either he will kill himself because ashamed to come into our presence or that someone else will do so upon

learning that I am to come and am already setting out against him. For then I should be deprived of a great prize both of war and of victory, a prize such as no human being has ever yet obtained. And what is this prize? To forgive a man who has wronged one, to remain a friend to one who has transgressed friendship, to continue faithful to one who has broken faith. Perhaps all this seems incredible to you, but you ought not to disbelieve it; for surely all goodness has not yet entirely perished from among men, but there is still in us a remnant of the ancient virtue. And if anyone should disbelieve it, that but renders the more ardent my desire, in order that men may see accomplished what no one would believe could come to pass. For that would be the one profit I could derive from our present ills, if I could settle this affair well and show to all mankind that there is a right way to deal even with civil wars." . . .

Marcus, when he was making preparations for the war against Cassius, would accept no barbarian assistance, although many nations rushed to offer their services; for he declared that the barbarians ought not to know of the troubles arising between Romans.

While Marcus was making preparations for the civil war, the death of Cassius was reported to him at the same time with the news of many victories over various barbarians . . . Marcus Antoninus was so greatly grieved at the death of Cassius that he could not bring himself even to look at the severed head of his enemy, but before the murderers drew near gave orders that it should be buried.

Thus was this pretender slain after a dream of empire lasting three months and six days; and his son, who was somewhere else, was also murdered. Marcus, upon reaching the provinces that had joined in Cassius' uprising, treated them all very leniently and did not put anyone to death, whether obscure or prominent.

This same emperor neither slew nor imprisoned nor put under guard at all any of the senators who had been associated with Cassius. Indeed, he did not so much as bring them before his own court, but merely sent them before the senate, as though charged with some other offence, and set a definite day for their trial. Of the others, he executed a very few, who had been guilty of some overt crime not only in co-operation with Cassius but also on their own account . . .

About this time Faustina also died, either of the gout, from which she suffered, or in some other manner, in order to avoid being convicted of her compact with Cassius. And yet Marcus destroyed all the papers that were found in the chests of [Cassius' secretary] Pudens without reading any of them, in order that he might not learn even the name of any of the conspirators who had written anything against him and so be

reluctantly forced to hate them. Another story is to the effect that Verus, who had been sent ahead into Syria, of which he had secured the governorship, found these papers among the effects of Cassius and destroyed them, remarking that this course would probably be most agreeable to the emperor, but that, even if he should be angry, it would be better that he himself alone should perish rather than many others. Marcus, indeed, was so averse to bloodshed that he even used to watch the gladiators in Rome contend, like athletes, without risking their lives; for he never gave any of them a sharp weapon, but they all fought with blunted weapons like foils furnished with buttons. And so far was he from countenancing any bloodshed that although he did, at the request of the populace, order a certain lion to be brought in that had been trained to eat men, yet he would not look at the beast nor emancipate [i.e., free] his trainer, in spite of the persistent demands of the spectators; instead, he commanded proclamation to be made that the man had done nothing to deserve his freedom.

In his great grief over the death of Faustina he wrote to the senate asking that no one of those who had co-operated with Cassius should be put to death, as if in this fact alone he could find some consolation for her loss. "May it never happen," he continued, "that any one of you should be slain during my reign either by my vote or by yours." And in concluding he said, "If I do not obtain this request, I shall hasten to my death." So pure and excellent and god-fearing did he show himself from first to last; and nothing could force him to do anything inconsistent with his character, neither the wickedness of their rash course nor the expectation of similar uprisings as the result of his pardoning these rebels. So far, indeed, was he from inventing any imaginary conspiracy or concocting any tragedy that had not really occurred, that he actually released those who had in the most open manner risen against him and taken up arms both against him and against his son, whether they were generals or heads of states or kings; and he put none of them to death either by his own action or by that of the senate or on any other pretext whatever . . .

And it was decreed by the senate that silver images of Marcus and Faustina should be set up in the temple of Venus and Roma, and that an altar should be erected whereon all the maidens married in the city and their bridegrooms should offer sacrifice; also that a golden statue of Faustina should be carried in a chair into the theatre, on every occasion when the emperor was to be a spectator, and placed in the special section from which she herself had been wont, when alive, to view the games, and that the most influential women should sit round about it.

When Marcus had come to Athens and had been initiated into the [Elysian] Mysteries, he not only bestowed honours upon the Athenians, but also, for the benefit of the whole world, he established teachers at Athens in every branch of knowledge, granting these teachers an annual salary. Then upon his return to Rome . . . he remitted all debts owed by anyone to the emperor's private treasury or to the public treasury for a period of forty-five years, not including the fifteen years of Hadrian; and he ordered all the documents relating to these debts to be burned in the Forum. He also gave gifts of money to many cities, including Smyrna, which had suffered terrible destruction by an earthquake; and he assigned the task of rebuilding that city to a senator of praetorian rank. Therefore I am surprised to hear people even to-day censuring him on the ground that he was not an open-handed prince. For, although in general he was most economical in very truth, yet he never avoided a single necessary expenditure, even though . . . he burdened no one by levies of money and though he found himself forced to lay out very large sums beyond the ordinary requirements.

When the Scythian situation once more demanded his attention, it caused him to give his son a wife, Crispina, sooner than he wished . . . Marcus also asked the senate for money from the public treasury, not because such funds were not already at the emperor's disposal, but because he was wont to declare that all the funds, both these and others, belonged to the senate and to the people. "As for us," he said, in addressing the senate, "we are so far from possessing anything of our own that even the house in which we live is yours." Then, after making this speech and after hurling the bloody spear, that was kept in the temple of Bellona, into what was supposed to be the enemy's territory (as I have heard men who were present relate), he set out . . . The barbarians held out for the entire day, but were all cut down by the Romans; and Marcus was saluted *imperator* for the tenth time.

Marcus gave audience to those who came as envoys from outside nations, but did not receive them all on the same footing; for this varied according as the several states were worthy to receive citizenship, or freedom from taxes, or perpetual or temporary exemption from the tribute, or even to enjoy permanent support. And when the Iazyges proved most useful to them, he released them from many of the restrictions that had been imposed upon them – in fact, from all save those affecting their assembling and trading together and the requirements that they should not use boats of their own and should keep away from the islands in the Ister . . .

With regard to the Quadi and the Marcomani, who sent envoys: – the twenty thousand soldiers that were stationed in forts among each of these tribes would not allow them to pasture their flocks or till the soil or do anything else in security, but kept receiving many deserters from the enemy's ranks and captives of their own; yet the soldiers themselves were enduring no great hardships, inasmuch as they had baths and all the necessaries of life in abundance. The Quadi, accordingly, being unwilling to endure the forts built to keep watch over them, attempted to migrate in a body to the land of the Semnones. But Antoninus learned beforehand of their intention and by barring the roads prevented their departure. This showed that he desired, not to acquire their territory, but to punish the men themselves.

Now if Marcus had lived longer, he would have subdued that entire region; but as it was, he passed away on the seventeenth of March, not as a result of the disease from which he still suffered, but by the act of his physicians, as I have been plainly told, who wished to do Commodus a favour. When now he was at the point of death, he commended his son to the protection of the soldiers (for he did not wish his death to appear to be due to Commodus), and to the military tribune who asked him for the watchword he said: "Go to the rising sun; I am already setting." After his death he received many marks of honour; among other things a gold statue of him was set up in the senate-house itself. This then was the manner of Marcus' death . . .

In addition to possessing all the other virtues, he ruled better than any others who had ever been in any position of power. To be sure, he could not display many feats of physical prowess; yet he had developed his body from a very weak one to one capable of the greatest endurance. Most of his life he devoted to beneficence, and that was the reason, perhaps, for his erecting a temple to Beneficence on the Capitol, though he called her by a most peculiar name, that had never been heard before [probably "Indulgence"]. He himself, then, refrained from all offences and did nothing amiss whether voluntarily or involuntarily; but the offences of the others, particularly those of his wife, he tolerated, and neither inquired into them nor punished them. So long as a person did anything good, he would praise him and use him for the service in which he excelled, but to his other conduct he paid no attention; for he declared that it is impossible for one to create such men as one desires to have, and so it is fitting to employ those who are already in existence for whatever service each of them may be able to render to the State. And that his whole conduct was due to no pretence but to real excellence is clear; for although he lived fifty-eight years, ten months, and twenty-two days,

of which time he had spent a considerable part as assistant to the first Antoninus, and had been emperor himself nineteen years and eleven days, yet from first to last he remained the same and did not change in the least. So truly was he a good man and devoid of all pretence.

His education also was of great assistance to him, for he had been trained both in rhetoric and in philosophical disputation. In the former he had Cornelius Fronto and Claudius Herodes for teachers, and, in the latter, Junius Rusticus and Apollonius of Nicomedeia, both of whom professed Zeno's doctrines. As a result, great numbers pretended to pursue philosophy, hoping that they might be enriched by the emperor. Most of all, however, he owed his advancement to his own natural gifts; for even before he associated with those teachers he had a strong impulse towards virtue. Indeed, while still a boy he so pleased all his relatives, who were numerous, influential and wealthy, that he was loved by them all; and when Hadrian, chiefly for this reason, had adopted him, he did not become haughty, but, though young and a Caesar, served Antoninus [Pius] most loyally throughout all the latter's reign and without giving offence showed honour to the others who were foremost in the State. He used always to salute the most worthy men in the House of Tiberius, where he lived, before visiting his father, not only without putting on the attire befitting his rank, but actually dressed as a private citizen, and receiving them in the very apartment where he slept. He used to visit many who were sick, and never missed going to his teachers. He would wear a dark cloak whenever he went out unaccompanied by his father, and he never employed a torch-bearer for himself alone. Upon being appointed leader of the knights he entered the Forum with the rest, although he was a Caesar. This shows how excellent was his natural disposition, though it was greatly aided by his education. He was always steeping himself in Greek and Latin rhetorical and philosophical learning, even after he had reached man's estate and had hopes of becoming emperor. Even before he was appointed Caesar he had a dream in which he seemed to have shoulders and arms of ivory, and to use them in all respect like his other members.

As a result of his close application and study he was extremely frail in body, though in the beginning he had been so vigorous that he used to fight in armour, and on the chase would strike down wild boars while on horseback; and not only in his early youth but even later he wrote most of his letters to his intimate friends with his own hand. However, he did not meet with the good fortune that he deserved, for he was not strong in body and was involved in a multitude of troubles throughout practically his entire reign. But for my part, I admire him all the more

for this very reason, that amid unusual and extraordinary difficulties he both survived himself and preserved the empire. Just one thing prevented him from being completely happy, namely, that after rearing and educating his son in the best possible way he was vastly disappointed in him. This matter must be our next topic; for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day.

2. *The Augustan History*: Marcus Antoninus the Philosopher

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*, also referred to as *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*) is a collection of biographies of emperors and usurpers ostensibly written by six authors in the late third to early fourth centuries AD. Scholars now believe that it is the work of a single author writing in the late fourth century.

The biography of Marcus Aurelius in the *Augustan History*, under the name of Julius Capitolinus, is taken from *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, tr. David Magie, vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann / Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 133–205. Translator's annotations have been omitted. Editor's additions appear in [].

1. Marcus Antoninus, devoted to philosophy as long as he lived and pre-eminent among emperors in purity of life, was the son of Annius Verus, who died while praetor . . .

2. He was a solemn child from the very beginning; and as soon as he passed beyond the age when children are brought up under the care of nurses, he was handed over to advanced instructors and attained to a knowledge of philosophy. In his more elementary education, he received instruction from Euphron in literature and from Geminus in drama, in music and likewise in geometry from Andron; on all of whom, as being spokesmen of the sciences, he afterwards conferred great honours. Besides these, his teachers in grammar were the Greek Alexander of Cotiaem, and the Latins Trosius Aper, Pollio, and Euty chius Proculus of Sicca; his masters in oratory were the Greeks Aninius Macer, Caninius Celer and Herodes Atticus, and the Latin Cornelius Fronto. Of these he conferred high honours on Fronto, even asking the senate to vote him a statue; but indeed he advanced Proculus also – even to a proconsulship, and assumed the burdens of the office himself.

He studied philosophy with ardour, even as a youth. For when he was twelve years old he adopted the dress and, a little later, the hardiness of a philosopher, pursuing his studies clad in a rough Greek cloak and sleeping on the ground; at his mother's solicitation, however, he reluctantly consented to sleep on a couch strewn with skins. He received instruction, furthermore, from . . . Apollonius of Chalcedon, the Stoic; 3. and such was his ardour for this school of philosophy, that even after he became a member of the imperial family, he still went to Apollonius' residence for instruction. In addition, he attended the lectures of [other] Stoics. He also attended the lectures of Claudius Severus, an adherent of the Peripatetic school, but he received most instruction from Junius Rusticus, whom he ever revered and whose disciple he became, a man esteemed in both private and public life, and exceedingly well acquainted with the Stoic system, with whom Marcus shared all his counsels both public and private, whom he greeted with a kiss prior to the prefects of the guard, whom he even appointed consul for a second term, and whom after his death he asked the senate to honour with statues. On his teachers in general, moreover, he conferred great honours, for he even kept golden statues of them in his chapel, and made it a custom to show respect for their tombs by personal visits and by offerings of sacrifices and flowers. He studied jurisprudence as well . . . and so much work and labour did he devote to his studies that he impaired his health – the only fault to be found with his entire childhood. He attended also the public schools of rhetoricians . . .

4. He was reared under the eye of Hadrian, who called him *Verissimus* ["The Truest"] . . . and did him the honour of enrolling him in the equestrian order when he was six years old and appointing him in his eighth year to the college of the *Salii* [priests of Mars]. While in this college, moreover, he received an omen of his future rule; for when they were all casting their crowns on the banqueting-couch of the god, according to the usual custom, his crown, as if placed there by his hand, fell on the brow of Mars. In this priesthood he was leader of the dance, seer, and master, and consequently both initiated and dismissed a great number of people; and in these ceremonies no one dictated the formulas to him, for all of them he had learned by himself.

In the fifteenth year of his life he assumed the *toga virilis* [toga of manhood], and straightway, at the wish of Hadrian, was betrothed to the daughter of Lucius Ceionius Commodus. Not long after this he was made prefect of the city during the Latin Festival, and in this position he conducted himself very brilliantly both in the presence of the magistrates and at the banquets of the Emperor Hadrian. Later, when his mother

asked him to give his sister part of the fortune left him by his father, he replied that he was content with the fortune of his grandfather and relinquished all of it, further declaring that if she wished, his mother might leave her own estate to his sister in its entirety, in order that she might not be poorer than her husband. So complaisant was he, moreover, that at times, when urged, he let himself be taken to hunts or the theatre or the spectacles. Besides, he gave some attention to painting, under the teacher Diognetus. He was also fond of boxing and wrestling and running and fowling, played ball very skilfully, and hunted well. But his ardour for philosophy distracted him from all these pursuits and made him serious and dignified, not ruining, however, a certain geniality in him, which he still manifested toward his household, his friends, and even to those less intimate, but making him, rather, austere, though not unreasonable, modest, though not inactive, and serious without gloom.

5. Such was his character, then, when, after the death of Lucius Caesar, Hadrian looked about for a successor to the throne. Marcus did not seem suitable, being at the time but eighteen years of age; and Hadrian chose for adoption Antoninus Pius, the uncle-in-law of Marcus, with the provision that Pius should in turn adopt Marcus . . . And it was on the day that Verus [i.e., Marcus Aurelius] was adopted that he dreamed that he had shoulders of ivory, and when he asked if they were capable of bearing a burden, he found them much stronger than before. When he discovered, moreover, that Hadrian had adopted him, he was appalled rather than overjoyed, and when told to move to the private home of Hadrian, reluctantly departed from his mother's villa. And when the members of his household asked him why he was sorry to receive royal adoption, he enumerated to them the evil things that sovereignty involved. At this time he first began to be called Aurelius instead of Annius, since, according to the law of adoption, he had passed into the Aurelian family, that is, into the family of Antoninus. And so he was adopted in his eighteenth year, and at the instance of Hadrian exception was made for his age and he was appointed quaestor for the year of the second consulship of Antoninus, now his father. Even after his adoption into the imperial house, he still showed the same respect to his own relatives that he had borne them as a commoner, was as frugal and careful of his means as he had been when he lived in a private home, and was willing to act, speak, and think according to his father's principles.

6. When Hadrian died at Baiae and Pius departed to bring back his remains, Marcus was left at Rome and discharged his grandfather's funeral rites, and, though quaestor, presented a gladiatorial spectacle as

a private citizen. Immediately after Hadrian's death Pius, through his wife, approached Marcus, and, breaking his betrothal with the daughter of Lucius Ceionius Commodus, [asked if] he was willing to espouse one so much his junior in years, he replied, after deliberating the question, that he was. And when this was done, Pius designated him as his colleague in the consulship, though he was still only quaestor, gave him the title of Caesar, appointed him while consul-elect one of the six commanders of the equestrian order and sat by him when he and his five colleagues were producing their official games, bade him take up his abode in the House of Tiberius and there provided him with all the pomp of a court, though Marcus objected to this, and finally took him into the priesthoods at the bidding of the senate. Later, he appointed him consul for a second term at the same time that he began his fourth. And all this time, when busied with so many public duties of his own, and while sharing his father's activities that he might be fitted for ruling the state, Marcus worked at his studies eagerly.

At this time he took Faustina to wife and, after begetting a daughter, received the tribunician power and the proconsular power outside the city, with the added right of making five proposals in the senate. Such was his influence with Pius that the Emperor was never quick to promote anyone without his advice. Moreover, he showed great deference to his father, though there were not lacking those who whispered things against him, especially Valerius Homullus, who, when he saw Marcus' mother Lucilla worshipping in her garden before a shrine of Apollo, whispered, "Yonder woman is now praying that you may come to your end, and her son rule". All of which influenced Pius not in the least, such was Marcus' sense of honour and such his modesty while heir to the throne. 7. He had such regard for his reputation, moreover, that even as a youth he admonished his procurators to do nothing high-handed and often refused sundry legacies that were left him, returning them to the nearest kin of the deceased. Finally, for three and twenty years he conducted himself in his father's home in such a manner that Pius felt more affection for him day by day, and never in all these years, save for two nights on different occasions, remained away from him.

For these reasons, then, when Antoninus Pius saw that the end of his life was drawing near, having summoned his friends and prefects, he commended Marcus to them all and formally named him as his successor in the empire. He then straightway gave the watch-word to the officer of the day as "Equanimity," and ordered that the golden statue of Fortune, customarily kept in his own bed-chamber, be transferred to the bed-chamber of Marcus . . .

Being forced by the senate to assume the government of the state after the death of the Deified Pius, Marcus made his brother his colleague in the empire, giving him the name Lucius Aurelius Verus Commodus and bestowing on him the titles Caesar and Augustus. Then they began to rule the state on equal terms, and then it was that the Roman Empire first had two emperors, when Marcus shared with another the empire he had inherited. Next, he himself took the name Antoninus, and just as though he were the father of Lucius Commodus, he gave him the name Verus, adding also the name Antoninus; he also betrothed him to his daughter Lucilla, though legally he was his brother . . .

And so, when they had done those things which had to be done in the presence of the senate, they set out together for the praetorian camp, and in honour of their joint rule promised twenty thousand sesterces apiece to the common soldiers and to the others money in proportion. The body of their father they laid in the Tomb of Hadrian with elaborate funeral rites, and on a holiday which came thereafter an official funeral train marched in parade. Both emperors pronounced panegyrics for their father from the Rostra, and they appointed a flamen [priest] for him chosen from their own kinsmen and a college of Aurelian priests from their closest friends.

8. And now, after they had assumed the imperial power, the two emperors acted in so democratic a manner that no one missed the lenient ways of Pius; for though Marullus, a writer of farces of the time, irritated them by his jests, he yet went unpunished. They gave funeral games for their father. And Marcus abandoned himself to philosophy, at the same time cultivating the good-will of the citizens. But now to interrupt the emperor's happiness and repose, there came the first flood of the Tiber – the severest one of their time – which ruined many houses in the city, drowned a great number of animals, and caused a most severe famine; all these disasters Marcus and Verus relieved by their own personal care and aid. At this time, moreover, came the Parthian war . . . And besides this, war was threatening in Britain, and the Chatti had burst into Germany and Raetia . . . But to the Parthian war, with the consent of the senate, Marcus despatched his brother Verus, while he himself remained at Rome, where conditions demanded the presence of an emperor . . . Verus, however, after he had come to Syria, lingered amid the debaucheries of Antioch and Daphne and busied himself with gladiatorial bouts and hunting. And yet, for waging the Parthian war through his legates, he was acclaimed Imperator, while meantime Marcus was at all hours keeping watch over the workings of the state, and, though reluctantly and sorely against his will, but nevertheless with patience, was enduring the debauchery of his brother. In a word, Marcus, though

residing at Rome, planned and executed everything necessary to the prosecution of the war.

9. In Armenia the campaign was successfully prosecuted under Statius Priscus, [its capital] Artaxata being taken, and the honorary name Armeniacus was given to each of the emperors. This name Marcus refused at first, by reason of his modesty, but afterwards accepted. When the Parthian war was finished, moreover, each emperor was called Parthicus; but this name also Marcus refused when first offered, though afterwards he accepted it. And further, when the title "Father of his Country" was offered him in his brother's absence, he deferred action upon it until the latter should be present . . .

In the meantime, he put such safeguards about suits for personal freedom – and he was the first to do so – as to order that every citizen should bestow names upon his free-born children within thirty days after birth and declare them to the prefects of the treasury of Saturn. In the provinces, too, he established the use of public records, in which entries concerning births were to be made in the same manner as at Rome in the office of the prefects of the treasury, the purpose being that if any one born in the provinces should plead a case to prove freedom, he might submit evidence from these records. Indeed, he strengthened this entire law dealing with declarations of freedom, and he enacted other laws dealing with money-lenders and public sales.

10. He made the senate the judge in many inquiries and even in those which belonged to his own jurisdiction . . . Nor did any of the emperors show more respect to the senate than he. To do the senate honour, moreover, he entrusted the settling of disputes to many men of praetorian and consular rank who then held no magistracy, in order that their prestige might be enhanced through their administration of law. He enrolled in the senate many of his friends, giving them the rank of aedile or praetor; and on a number of poor but honest senators he bestowed the rank of tribune or aedile. Nor did he ever appoint anyone to senatorial rank whom he did not know well personally . . . He always attended the meetings of the senate if he was in Rome, even though no measure was to be proposed, and if he wished to propose anything himself, he came in person even from Campania. More than this, when elections were held he often remained even until night, never leaving the senate-chamber until the consul announced, "We detain you no longer, Conscript Fathers". Further, he appointed the senate judge in appeals made from the consul.

To the administration of justice he gave singular care. He added court-days to the calendar until he had set 230 days for the pleading of cases and judging of suits . . .

11. In the matter of public expenditures he was exceedingly careful, and he forbade all libels on the part of false informers, putting the mark of infamy on such as made false accusations. He scorned such accusations as would swell the privy-purse. He devised many wise measures for the support of the state-poor, and, that he might give a wider range to the senatorial functions, he appointed supervisors for many communities from the senate. In times of famine he furnished the Italian communities with food from the city; indeed, he made careful provision for the whole matter of the grain-supply. He limited gladiatorial shows in every way, and lessened the cost of free theatrical performances also, decreeing that though an actor might receive five aurei [gold pieces], nevertheless no one who gave a performance should expend more than ten. The streets of the city and the highways he maintained with the greatest care. As for the grain-supply, for that he provided laboriously. He appointed judges for Italy and thereby provided for its welfare . . . And besides this, he gave the commissioners of districts and streets power either themselves to punish those who fleeced anyone of money beyond his due assessment, or to bring them to the prefect of the city for punishment. He engaged rather in the restoration of old laws than in the making of new, and ever kept near him prefects with whose authority and responsibility he framed his laws. He made use of [Cervidius] Scaevola also, a man particularly learned in jurisprudence.

12. Toward the people he acted just as one acts in a free state. He was at all times exceedingly reasonable both in restraining men from evil and in urging them to good, generous in rewarding and quick to forgive, thus making bad men good, and good men very good, and he even bore with unruffled temper the insolence of not a few . . . The privy-purse never influenced his judgment in law-suits involving money. Finally, if he was firm, he was also reasonable.

After his brother had returned victorious from Syria, the title "Father of his Country" was decreed to both, inasmuch as Marcus in the absence of Verus had conducted himself with great consideration toward both senators and commons. Furthermore, the civic crown [the reward for saving a fellow citizen's life in battle] was offered to both; and Lucius demanded that Marcus triumph with him, and demanded also that the name Caesar should be given to Marcus' sons. But Marcus was so free from love of display that though he triumphed with Lucius, nevertheless after Lucius' death he called himself only Germanicus, the title he had won in his own war. In the triumphal procession, moreover, they carried with them Marcus' children of both sexes, even his unmarried daughters; and they viewed the games held in honour of the triumph

clad in the triumphal robe. Among other illustrations of his unfailing consideration towards others this act of kindness is to be told: After one lad, a rope-dancer, had fallen, he ordered mattresses spread under all rope-dancers. This is the reason why a net is stretched under them to-day.

While the Parthian war was still in progress, the Marcomannic war broke out . . . Even at the time of the famine the Emperor had hinted at this war to the people, and when his brother returned after five years' service, he brought the matter up in the senate, saying that both emperors were needed for the German war. 13. So great was the dread of this Marcomannic war, that Antoninus summoned priests from all sides, performed foreign religious ceremonies, and purified the city in every way, and he was delayed thereby from setting out to the seat of war. The Roman ceremony of the feast of the gods [a ceremony of purification] was celebrated for seven days. And there was such a pestilence, besides, that the dead were removed in carts and wagons . . . Thousands were carried off by the pestilence, including many nobles, for the most prominent of whom Antoninus erected statues. Such, too, was his kindness of heart that he had funeral ceremonies performed for the lower classes even at the public expense . . .

14. Clad in the military cloak the two emperors finally set forth, for now not only were the Victuali and Marcomanni throwing everything into confusion, but other tribes, who had been driven on by the more distant barbarians and had retreated before them, were ready to attack Italy if not peaceably received. And not a little good resulted from that expedition, even by the time they had advanced as far as Aquileia, for several kings retreated, together with their peoples, and put to death the authors of the trouble. And the Quadi, after they had lost their king, said that they would not confirm the successor who had been elected until such a course was approved by our emperors. Nevertheless, Lucius went on, though reluctantly, after a number of peoples had sent ambassadors to the legates of the emperors asking pardon for the rebellion . . . Finally, they crossed the Alps, and pressing further on, completed all measures necessary for the defence of Italy and Illyricum. They then decided, at Lucius' insistence, that letters should first be sent ahead to the senate and that Lucius should then return to Rome. But on the way, after they had set out upon their journey, Lucius died from a stroke of apoplexy while riding in the carriage with his brother.

15. It was customary with Marcus to read, listen to, and sign documents at the circus-games; because of this habit he was openly ridiculed, it is said, by the people . . .

Such was Marcus' sense of honour, moreover, that although Verus' vices mightily offended him, he concealed and defended them; he also deified him after his death, aided and advanced his aunts and sisters by means of honours and pensions, honoured Verus himself with many sacrifices, consecrated a flamen for him and a college of Antonine priests, and gave him all honours that are appointed for the deified. There is no emperor who is not the victim of some evil tale, and Marcus is no exception. For it was bruited about, in truth, that he put Verus out of the way, either with poison – by cutting a sow's womb with a knife smeared on one side with poison, and then offering the poisoned portion to his brother to eat, while keeping the harmless portion for himself – or, at least, by employing the physician Posidippus, who bled Verus, it is said, unseasonably. After Verus' death Cassius revolted from Marcus.

16. Such was Marcus' kindness toward his own family that he bestowed the insignia of every office on all his kin, while on his son [Commodus], and an accursed and foul one he was, he hastened to bestow the name of Caesar, then afterward the priesthood, and, a little later, the title of imperator and a share in a triumph and the consulship. It was at this time that Marcus, though acclaimed imperator, ran on foot in the Circus by the side of the triumphal car in which his son was seated.

After the death of Verus, Marcus Antoninus held the empire alone, a nobler man by far and more abounding in virtues, especially as he was no longer hampered by Verus' faults, neither by those of excessive candour and hot-headed plain speaking, from which Verus suffered through natural folly, nor by those others which had particularly irked Marcus Antoninus even from his earliest years, the principles and habits of a depraved mind. Such was Marcus' own repose of spirit that neither in grief nor in joy did he ever change countenance, being wholly given over to the Stoic philosophy, which he had not only learned from all the best masters, but also acquired for himself from every source. For this reason Hadrian would have taken him for his own successor to the throne had not his youth prevented . . .

17. Toward the provinces from then on he acted with extreme restraint and consideration. He carried on a successful campaign against the Germans. He himself singled out the Marcomannic war – a war which surpassed any in the memory of man – and waged it with both valour and success, and that at a time when a grievous pestilence had carried away thousands of civilians and soldiers. And so, by crushing the Marcomanni, the Sarmatians, the Vandals, and even the Quadi, he freed the Pannonias from bondage, and with Commodus his son, whom he had previously named Caesar, triumphed at Rome, as we told above.

When he had drained the treasury for this war, moreover, and could not bring himself to impose any extraordinary tax on the provincials, he held a public sale in the Forum of the Deified Trajan of the imperial furnishings, and sold goblets of gold and crystal and murra [a kind of agate], even flagons made for kings, his wife's silken gold-embroidered robes, and, indeed, even certain jewels which he had found in considerable numbers in a particularly holy cabinet of Hadrian's. This sale lasted for two months, and such a store of gold was realised thereby, that after he had conducted the remainder of the Marcomannic war in full accordance with his plans, he gave the buyers to understand that if any of them wished to return his purchases and recover his money, he could do so. Nor did he make it unpleasant for anyone who did or did not return what he had bought. At this time, also, he granted permission to the more prominent men to hold banquets with the same pomp that he used himself and with servants similar to his own. In the matter of public games, furthermore, he was so liberal as to present a hundred lions together in one performance and have them all killed with arrows.

18. After he had ruled, then, with the good-will of all, and had been named and beloved variously as brother, father, or son by various men according to their several ages, in the eighteenth year of his reign and the sixty-first of his life he closed his last day. Such love for him was manifested on the day of the imperial funeral that none thought that men should lament him, since all were sure that he had been lent by the gods and had now returned to them. Finally, before his funeral was held, so many say, the senate and people, not in separate places but sitting together, as was never done before or after, hailed him as a gracious god.

This man, so great, so good, and an associate of the gods both in life and in death, left one son Commodus; and had he been truly fortunate he would not have left a son. It was not enough, indeed, that people of every age, sex, degree and rank in life, gave him all honours given to the gods, but also whosoever failed to keep the Emperor's image in his home, if his fortune were such that he could or should have done so, was deemed guilty of sacrilege. Even to-day, in fine, statues of Marcus Antoninus stand in many a home among the household gods. Nor were there lacking men who observed that he foretold many things by dreams and were thereby themselves enabled to predict events that did come to pass. Therefore a temple was built for him and priests were appointed, dedicated to the service of the Antonines, both Sodales [priests in charge of the cult of a deified emperor] and flamens, and all else that the usage of old time decreed for a consecrated temple.

19. Some say, and it seems plausible, that Commodus Antoninus, his son and successor, was not begotten by him, but in adultery; they embroider this assertion, moreover, with a story current among the people. On a certain occasion, it was said, Faustina, the daughter of Pius and wife of Marcus, saw some gladiators pass by, and was inflamed for love of one of them; and afterwards, when suffering from a long illness, she confessed the passion to her husband. And when Marcus reported this to the Chaldeans [astrologers], it was their advice that the gladiator should be killed and that Faustina should bathe in his blood and thus couch [i.e., sleep] with her husband. When this was done, the passion was indeed allayed, but their son Commodus was born a gladiator, not really a prince; for afterwards as emperor he fought almost a thousand gladiatorial bouts before the eyes of the people . . . This story is considered plausible, as a matter of fact, for the reason that the son of so virtuous a prince had habits worse than any trainer of gladiators, any play-actor, any fighter in the arena, or, in fine, anything brought into existence from the offscourings of all dishonour and crime. Many writers, however, state that Commodus was really begotten in adultery, since it is generally known that Faustina, while at Caieta, used to choose out lovers from among the sailors and gladiators. When Marcus Antoninus was told about this, that he might divorce, if not kill her, he is reported to have said "If we send our wife away, we must also return her dowry". And what was her dowry? the Empire, which, after he had been adopted at the wish of Hadrian, he had inherited from his father-in-law Pius.

But truly such is the power of the life, the holiness, the serenity, and the righteousness of a good emperor that not even the scorn felt for his kin can sully his own good name. For since Antoninus held ever to his moral code and was moved by no man's whispered machinations, men thought no less of him because his son was a gladiator, his wife infamous. Even now he is called a god . . . as far as philosophy is concerned, Plato himself, were he to return to life, could not be such a philosopher. So much, then, for these matters, told briefly and concisely.

20. But as for the acts of Marcus Antoninus after the death of his brother, they are as follows: First of all, he conveyed his body to Rome and laid it in the tomb of his fathers. Then divine honours were ordered for Verus. Later, while rendering thanks to the senate for his brother's deification, he darkly hinted that all the strategic plans whereby the Parthians had been overcome were his own. He added, besides, certain statements in which he indicated that now at length he would make a fresh beginning in the management of the state, now that Verus, who had seemed somewhat negligent, was removed. And the senate took this

precisely as it was said, so that Marcus seemed to be giving thanks that Verus had departed this life. Afterwards he bestowed many privileges and much honour and money on all Verus' sisters, kin, and freedmen. For he was exceedingly solicitous about his good reputation, indeed he was wont to ask what men really said of him, and to correct whatever seemed justly blamed.

Just before setting out for the German war, and before the period of mourning had yet expired, he married his daughter [Lucilla, Verus' widow] to Claudius Pompeianus, the son of a Roman knight, and now advanced in years, a native of Antioch, whose birth was not sufficiently noble (though Marcus later made him consul twice), since Marcus' daughter was an Augusta [Empress] and the daughter of an Augusta. Indeed, Faustina and the girl who was given in marriage were both opposed to this match.

21. . . . And besides all this, he proceeded with all care to enrol legions for the Marcomannic and German wars. And lest all this prove burdensome to the provinces, he held an auction of the palace furnishings in the Forum of the Deified Trajan, as we have related, and sold there, besides robes and goblets and golden flagons, even statues and paintings by great artists. He overwhelmed the Marcomanni while they were crossing the Danube, and restored the plunder to the provincials. 22. Then, from the borders of Illyricum even into Gaul, all the nations banded together against us . . . Furthermore, war threatened in Parthia and Britain. Thereupon, by immense labour on his own part, while his soldiers reflected his energy, and both legates and prefects of the guard led the host, he conquered these exceedingly fierce peoples, accepted the surrender of the Marcomanni, and brought a great number of them to Italy.

Always before making any move, he conferred with the foremost men concerning matters not only of war but also of civil life. This saying particularly was ever on his lips: "It is juster that I should yield to the counsel of such a number of such friends than that such a number of such friends should yield to my wishes, who am but one". But because Marcus, as a result of his system of philosophy, seemed harsh in his military discipline and indeed in his life in general, he was bitterly assailed; to all who spoke ill of him, however, he made reply either in speeches or in pamphlets. And because in this German, or Marcomannic, war, or rather I should say in this "War of Many Nations," many nobles perished, for all of whom he erected statues in the Forum of Trajan, his friends often urged him to abandon the war and return to Rome. He, however, disregarded this advice and stood his ground, nor did he withdraw before he had

brought all the wars to a conclusion . . . And having summoned his son Commodus to the border of the empire, he gave him the toga virilis, in honour of which he distributed largess among the people, and appointed him consul before the legal age.

23. . . . He himself was very sparing of the public money in giving largess – a fact which we mention rather in praise than in disparagement – but nevertheless he gave financial assistance to the deserving, furnished aid to towns on the brink of ruin, and, when necessity demanded, cancelled tribute or taxes. And while absent from Rome he left forceful instructions that the amusements of the Roman people should be provided for by the richest givers of public spectacles, because, when he took the gladiators away to the war, there was talk among the people that he intended to deprive them of their amusements and thereby drive them to the study of philosophy. Indeed, he had ordered that the actors of pantomimes should begin their performances nine days later than usual in order that business might not be interfered with. There was talk, as we mentioned above, about his wife's intrigues with pantomimists; however, he cleared her of all these charges in his letters. He forbade riding and driving within the limits of any city. He abolished common baths for both sexes. He reformed the morals of the matrons and young nobles which were growing lax . . .

24. It was customary with Antoninus to punish all crimes with lighter penalties than were usually inflicted by the laws; although at times, toward those who were clearly guilty of serious crimes he remained implacable. He himself held those trials of distinguished men which involved the death-penalty, and always with the greatest justice. Once, indeed, he rebuked a praetor who heard the pleas of accused men in too summary a fashion, and ordered him to hold the trials again, saying that it was a matter of concern to the honour of the accused that they should be heard by a judge who really represented the people. He scrupulously observed justice, moreover, even in his dealings with captive enemies. He settled innumerable foreigners on Roman soil. By his prayers he summoned a thunderbolt from heaven against a war-engine of the enemy, and successfully besought rain for his men when they were suffering from thirst.

He wished to make a province of Marcomannia and likewise of Sarmatia, and he would have done so had not Avidius Cassius just then raised a rebellion in the East. This man proclaimed himself emperor, some say, at the wish of Faustina, who was now in despair over her husband's death; others, however, say that Cassius proclaimed himself emperor after spreading false rumours of Antoninus' death, and indeed

he had called him the Deified. Antoninus was not much disturbed by this revolt, nor did he adopt harsh measures against Cassius' dear ones. The senate, however, declared Cassius a public enemy and confiscated his property to the public treasury. 25. The Emperor, then, abandoning the Sarmatian and Marcomannic wars, set out against him. At Rome there was a panic for fear that Cassius would arrive during Antoninus' absence; but he was speedily slain and his head was brought to Antoninus. Even then, Marcus did not rejoice at Cassius' death, and gave orders that his head should be buried . . . Marcus then forbade the senate to impose any heavy punishment upon those who had conspired in this revolt; and at the same time, in order that his reign might escape such a stain, he requested that during his rule no senator should be executed. Those who had been exiled, moreover, he ordered to be recalled; and there were only a very few of the centurions who suffered the death-penalty. He pardoned the communities which had sided with Cassius, and even went so far as to pardon the citizens of Antioch, who had said many things in support of Cassius and in opposition to himself. But he did abolish their games and public meetings, including assemblies of every kind, and issued a very severe edict against the people themselves . . .

26. He conducted many negotiations with kings, and ratified peace with all the kings and satraps of Persia when they came to meet him. He was exceedingly beloved by all the eastern provinces, and on many, indeed, he left the imprint of philosophy. While in Egypt he conducted himself like a private citizen and a philosopher at all the stadia, temples, and in fact everywhere. And although the citizens of Alexandria had been outspoken in wishing Cassius success, he forgave everything and left his daughter among them. And now, in the village of Halala, in the foothills of Mount Taurus, he lost his wife Faustina, who succumbed to a sudden illness. He asked the senate to decree her divine honours and a temple, and likewise delivered a eulogy of her, although she had suffered grievously from the reputation of lewdness. Of this, however, Antoninus was either ignorant or affected ignorance. He established a new order of Faustinian girls in honour of his dead wife, expressed his pleasure at her deification by the senate, and because she had accompanied him on his summer campaign, called her "Mother of the Camp." And besides this, he made the village where Faustina died a colony, and there built a temple in her honour . . .

With characteristic clemency, he suffered rather than ordered the execution of Cassius, while Heliodorus, the son of Cassius, was merely banished, and others of his children exiled but allowed part of their father's property. Cassius' sons, moreover, were granted over half their

father's estate and were enriched besides with sums of gold and silver, while the women of the family were presented with jewels. Indeed, Alexandria, Cassius' daughter, and Druncianus, his son-in-law, were allowed to travel wherever they wished, and were even put under the protection of the Emperor's uncle by marriage. And further than this, he grieved at Cassius' death, saying that he had wished to complete his reign without shedding the blood of a single senator.

27. After he had settled affairs in the East he came to Athens, and had himself initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries in order to prove that he was innocent of any wrong-doing, and he entered the sanctuary unattended . . . When he reached Rome he triumphed, then hastened to Lavinium. Presently he appointed Commodus his colleague in the tribunician power, bestowed largess upon the people, and gave marvellous games; shortly thereafter he remedied many civil abuses, and set a limit to the expense of gladiatorial shows. Ever on his lips was a saying of Plato's, that those states prospered where the philosophers were kings or the kings philosophers. He united his son in marriage with the daughter of Bruttius Praesens, performing the ceremony in the manner of ordinary citizens; and in celebration of the marriage he gave largess to the people.

He then turned his attention to completing the war, in the conduct of which he died. During this time the behaviour of his son steadily fell away from the standard the Emperor had set for himself. For three years thereafter he waged war with the Marcomanni, the Hermunduri, the Sarmatians, and the Quadi, and had he lived a year longer he would have made these regions provinces. Two days before his death, it is said, he summoned his friends and expressed the same opinion about his son that Philip expressed about Alexander when he too thought poorly of his son, and added that it grieved him exceedingly to leave a son behind him. For already Commodus had made it clear that he was base and cruel.

28. He died in the following manner: When he began to grow ill, he summoned his son and besought him first of all not to think lightly of what remained of the war, lest he seem a traitor to the state. And when his son replied that his first desire was good health, he allowed him to do as he wished, only asking him to wait a few days and not leave at once. Then, being eager to die, he refrained from eating or drinking, and so aggravated the disease. On the sixth day he summoned his friends, and with derision for all human affairs and scorn for death, said to them: "Why do you weep for me, instead of thinking about the pestilence and about death which is the common lot of us all?" And when they were

about to retire he groaned and said: "If you now grant me leave to go, I bid you farewell and pass on before". And when he was asked to whom he commended his son he replied: "To you, if he prove worthy, and to the immortal gods". The army, when they learned of his sickness, lamented loudly, for they loved him singularly. On the seventh day he was weary and admitted only his son, and even him he at once sent away in fear that he would catch the disease. And when his son had gone, he covered his head as though he wished to sleep and during the night he breathed his last. It is said that he foresaw that after his death Commodus would turn out as he actually did, and expressed the wish that his son might die, lest, as he himself said, he should become another Nero, Caligula, or Domitian.

29. It is held to Marcus' discredit that he advanced his wife's lovers, Tertullus and Tutilius and Orfitus and Moderatus, to various offices of honour, although he had caught Tertullus in the very act of breakfasting with his wife. In regard to this man the following dialogue was spoken on the stage in the presence of Antoninus himself. The Fool asked the Slave the name of his wife's lover and the Slave answered "Tullus" three times [i.e., *ter Tullus*]; and when the Fool kept on asking, the Slave replied, "I have already told you thrice Tullus is his name." But the city-populace and others besides talked a great deal about this incident and found fault with Antoninus for his forbearance.

Previous to his death, and before he returned to the Marcomannic war, he swore in the Capitol that no senator had been executed with his knowledge and consent, and said that had he known he would have spared even the insurgents. Nothing did he fear and deprecate more than a reputation for covetousness, a charge of which he tried to clear himself in many letters. Some maintain – and held it a fault – that he was insincere and not as guileless as he seemed, indeed not as guileless as either [Antoninus] Pius or [Lucius] Verus had been. Others accused him of encouraging the arrogance of the court by keeping his friends from general social intercourse and from banquets.

His parents were deified at his command, and even his parents' friends, after their death, he honoured with statues.

He did not readily accept the version of those who were partisans in any matter, but always searched long and carefully for the truth.

After the death of Faustina, Fabia [to whom he had been betrothed in his youth] tried to manoeuvre a marriage with him. But he took a concubine instead, the daughter of a steward of his wife's, rather than put a stepmother over so many children.

3. Herodian

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Greek historian Herodian (born *c.* AD 180) was probably an imperial freedman. The eight books of his work, which is not free from factual errors and often reads like a historical novel, covers the period from AD 180 to 238 (the accession of Gordian III.). The following excerpts are from Chapters 2–5 of Book 1, taken from Edward C. Echols (tr.), *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire from the Death of Marcus Aurelius to the Accession of Gordian III* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). Translator's annotations have been omitted.

THE emperor Marcus Aurelius had a number of daughters but only two sons. One of them (his name was Verissimus) died very young; the surviving son, Commodus, his father reared with great care, summoning to Rome from all over the empire men renowned for learning in their own countries. He paid these scholars large fees to live in Rome and supervise his son's education. When his daughters came of age, he married them to the most distinguished of the senators, selecting his sons-in-law not from the aristocrats, with their excessive pride in their ancestry, nor from the wealthy, with their protective shield of riches; he preferred men who were modest in manner and moderate in their way of life, for he considered these virtues to be the only fit and enduring possessions of the soul.

He was concerned with all aspects of excellence, and in his love of ancient literature he was second to no man, Roman or Greek; this is evident from all his sayings and writings which have come down to us. To his subjects he revealed himself as a mild and moderate emperor; he gave audience to those who asked for it and forbade his bodyguard to drive off those who happened to meet him. Alone of the emperors, he gave proof of his learning not by mere words or knowledge of philosophical doctrines but by his blameless character and temperate way of life. His reign thus produced a very large number of intelligent men, for subjects like to imitate the example set by their ruler . . .

WHEN Marcus was an old man, exhausted not only by age but also by labors and cares, he suffered a serious illness while visiting the Pannonians. When the emperor suspected that there was little hope of his recovery, and realized that his son would become emperor while still very young, he was afraid that the undisciplined youth, deprived of parental advice, might neglect his excellent studies and good habits and turn to drinking and debauchery (for the minds of the young, prone to pleasures, are turned very easily from the virtues of education) when he had absolute and unrestrained power. This learned man was disturbed

also by the memory of those who had become sole rulers in their youth . . . When he recalled such spectacles of despotism . . . he was apprehensive and anticipated evil events. Then, too, the Germans on the border gave him much cause for anxiety. He had not yet forced all these tribes to submit; some he had won to an alliance by persuasion; others he had conquered by force of arms. There were some who, although they had broken their pact with him, had returned to the alliance temporarily because of the fear occasioned by the presence of so great an emperor. He suspected that, contemptuous of his son's youth, they would launch an assault upon him; for the barbarian is ever eager to revolt on any pretext.

TROUBLED by these thoughts, Marcus summoned his friends and kinsmen. Placing his son beside him and raising himself up a little on his couch, he began to speak to them as follows:

"That you are distressed to see me in this condition is hardly surprising. It is natural for men to pity the sufferings of their fellow men, and the misfortunes that occur before their very eyes arouse even greater compassion. I think, however, that an even stronger bond of affection exists between you and me; in return for the favors I have done you, I have a reasonable right to expect your reciprocal good will. And now is the proper time for me to discover that not in vain have I showered honor and esteem upon you for so long, and for you to return the favor by showing that you are not unmindful of the benefits you have received from me. Here is my son, whom you yourselves have educated, approaching the prime of youth and, as it were, in need of pilots for the stormy seas ahead. I fear that he, tossed to and fro by his lack of knowledge of what he needs to know, may be dashed to pieces on the rocks of evil practices. You, therefore, together take my place as his father, looking after him and giving him wise counsel. No amount of money is large enough to compensate for a tyrant's excesses, nor is the protection of his bodyguards enough to shield the ruler who does not possess the good will of his subjects. The ruler who implants in the hearts of his subjects not fear resulting from cruelty, but love occasioned by kindness, is most likely to complete his reign safely. For it is not those who submit from necessity but those who are persuaded to obedience who continue to serve and to suffer without suspicion and without pretense of flattery. And they never rebel unless they are driven to it by violence and arrogance. When a man holds absolute power, it is difficult for him to control his desires. But if you give my son proper advice in such matters and constantly remind him of what he has heard here, you will make him the best of emperors for yourselves and for all, and you will be paying

the greatest tribute to my memory. Only in this way can you make my memory immortal.”

At this point Marcus suffered a severe fainting spell and sank back on his couch, exhausted by weakness and worry. All who were present pitied him, and some cried out in their grief, unable to control themselves. After living another night and day, Marcus died, leaving to men of his own time a legacy of regret; to future ages, an eternal memorial of excellence. When the news of his death was made public, the whole army in Pannonia and the common people as well were grief-stricken; indeed, no one in the Roman empire received the report without weeping. All cried out in a swelling chorus, calling him “Kind Father,” “Noble Emperor,” “Brave General,” and “Wise, Moderate Ruler,” and every man spoke the truth.

DURING the next few days Commodus’ advisers kept him busy with his father’s funeral rites; then they thought it advisable to bring the youth into the camp to address the troops and, by distributing money to them – the usual practice of those who succeed to the throne – to win the support of the army. Accordingly, all the soldiers were ordered to proceed to the assembly field to welcome them. After performing the imperial sacrifices, Commodus, surrounded by the advisers appointed by his father (and there were many learned men among them), mounted the high platform erected for him in the middle of the camp and spoke as follows:

“I am fully persuaded that you share in my grief over what has occurred, and that you are no less distressed by it than I. At no time when my father was with me did I see fit to play the despot with you. He took greater delight, I am convinced, in calling me ‘fellow soldier’ than in calling me ‘son,’ for he considered the latter a title bestowed by Nature, the former, a partnership based on excellence. While I was still an infant he often brought me to you and placed me in your arms, a pledge of the trust he had in you. And for that reason I have every hope that I shall enjoy your universal good will, since I am indebted to you old soldiers for rearing me, and I may properly call you young soldiers my fellow students in deeds of arms, for my father loved us all and taught us every good thing. To follow him, Fortune has given the empire not to an adopted successor but to me. The prestige of those who reigned before me was increased by the empire, which they received as an additional honor, but I alone was born for you in the imperial palace. I never knew the touch of common cloth. The purple received me as I came forth into the world, and the sun shone down on me, man and emperor, at the same moment. And if you consider the matter properly, you will honor

me as an emperor born to you, not presented to you. Assuredly, my father has gone up to heaven, where he is already companion and counselor of the gods. But it is our task to devote ourselves to human affairs and to the administration of earthly matters. To set these affairs in order and make them secure is for you to undertake, if with resolute courage you would finish what is left of the war and carry forward to the northern seas the boundaries of the Roman empire. These exploits will indeed bring you renown, and in this way you will pay fitting respect to the memory of our mutual father. You may be sure that he hears and sees what we do. And we may count ourselves fortunate to have such a man as a witness when we do what has to be done. Up to now, all that you have courageously accomplished is attributable to his wisdom and his generalship. But now, whatever zeal you display in further exploits under me, your new emperor, will gain for you a reputation for praiseworthy loyalty and bravery. By these dauntless exploits you will confer upon us added dignity. Crushed at the beginning of a new imperial reign, the barbarian will not be so bold to act at the present, scorning our youth, and will be cautious and fearful in the future, mindful of what he has suffered."

After he had finished his speech, Commodus won the support of the army by a generous distribution of money and returned to the imperial quarters.

Chronology: The Roman Empire at the Time of Marcus Aurelius

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following chronology provides the most important dates for the rule of Marcus Aurelius, born in Rome on April 26, 121. Source: Dietmar Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 137–147. All dates are AD.

March 17, 136

Marcus assumes the *toga virilis* (“toga of manhood”). Official name: Marcus Annius Verus. Engagement to Ceionia Fabia.

February 25, 138

Adoption by Antoninus Pius. Official name: Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus.

138

Engagement to Antoninus Pius' daughter Annia Galeria Faustina.

139

Assumption of title of Caesar; member in all priesthoods, among other offices.

145

Marriage to Faustina.

March 7, 149

Birth of Lucilla (Annia Aurelia Galeria Lucilla). Marcus and Faustina will have a total of thirteen children, most of whom die young.

March 7, 161

Marcus becomes emperor, together with his adoptive brother Lucius Verus. Official name and title: Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus – Pontifex Maximus.

August 31, 161

Birth of Lucius Aurelius Commodus.

163

Lucius Verus marries Lucilla. Lucilla proclaimed empress.

166

Marcus holds triumph, with Lucius Verus, over the Parthians. Assumption of title *pater patriae* (“Father of his country”). Commodus proclaimed Caesar (Lucius Aurelius Commodus Caesar). Lucilla gives birth to a daughter.

168

Marcus departs from Rome. Journey across the Alps, inspection of Danube provinces.

169

Return to Rome after Lucius Verus’ death. Lucilla marries Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus. Marcus departs for first German campaign.

170

German invasion.

170 or later

Lucilla gives birth to a son.

174 (?)

Peace with the Marcomanni (Marcomani).

175

Revolt and death of Avidius Cassius. Peace with the Iazyges. Commodus assumes the *toga virilis*.

175–176 (winter)

Residence in Alexandria, Egypt.

176

Return to Rome via Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. Death of Faustina. Marcus and Commodus are initiated into the Elysian Mysteries. Possibly first acclamation of Commodus as emperor on November 27. Marcus holds triumph over Germans and Sarmatians in Rome, together with Commodus.

177

Persecution of Christians in Lyons. Commodus becomes emperor (Imperator Caesar Lucius Aurelius Commodus Augustus) and is proclaimed *pater patriae*.

178

Marcus departs from Rome for second German campaign.

March 17, 180

Marcus dies in Vindobona (Vienna) or, more likely, in Bononia near Sirmium. Burial in Hadrian's mausoleum. Deification as Divus Marcus Antoninus Pius. Commodus becomes sole emperor, the first "born to the purple." He will be assassinated on December 31, 192.

181

Conspiracy against Commodus by Lucilla. She is banished to Capri and executed soon after.

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