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Eastlake, Laura. *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 257 pp.

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<1>Donald E. Hall's 2000 review essay "The End(s) of Masculinity Studies" offers an evaluation of numerous field-establishing scholarly works that considered men, masculinity, and male sexualities in nineteenth-century literature and culture. In his concluding remarks, Hall acknowledges the abundance of work still to do in this arena, but he suggests, "we do understand more fully its beginnings, component parts, and its 'ends,' in the sense of whose ends it serves and how manifestations of it are supplanted or interrogated at times" (236). Laura Eastlake's *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2019) complicates Hall's assessment by offering a compelling exploration of the various ways in which conflicting discourses of Roman antiquity were received and adapted within Victorian culture, expanding our conceptions of the "ends" served by masculinity and its diverse "manifestations." Indeed, Eastlake's work reminds us that "masculinity is contested" throughout the period, and she offers focused readings that demonstrate how the cultural discussions of Rome and its legacies inform and shape this contestation (13).

<2>Central to Eastlake's argument is her claim that cultural discussions about Victorian masculinity are informed by "complex, contradictory, and continuously evolving conceptions of Rome." She makes clear that

over the course of the nineteenth century Rome was held up by various individuals and groups as a model of stoic virtue; of dangerous revolutionary sentiment and popular violence; of depraved excess and indulgence; of bloodthirstiness and brutality; of pagan persecution of Christianity as well as the origin point of the Christian faith, of poetic and aesthetic accomplishment; of national pride and honour; of imperial splendor; and, at the same time, as a warning tale of imperial decline and fall. (3-4)

This eclectic and incongruous range of cultural uses of/for Rome drives Eastlake's impressive scholarship; the ancient civilization is at once an inspiration for empire and a harbinger of deterioration, an icon for reform and a warning of despotism, and a model of nation-building and a symbol of decadence. Eastlake maintains a focus on reception and draws on the critical ideas of Gadamer to theorize "Rome as a contested space, with an array of possible scripts and narratives that could be harnessed to frame models of masculine ideality, or to vilify perceived deviance from those ideas" (11). Roman antiquity, in short, becomes a vehicle to make and remake Victorian masculinity, serving different cultural ends in the "struggle over the codification of manliness whereby the cultural authority to assign meaning to the Roman age is equivalent to and indicative of the power to speak authoritatively about masculinity in the present" (13). And as Eastlake unpacks her thesis, she offers fascinating close readings of both canonical and

noncanonical texts, illustrating dynamic deployments of Rome that fashion nineteenth-century men and manliness.

<3>Eastlake organizes her book into four sections: “Classical Education and Manliness in the Nineteenth Century,” “Political Masculinity in the Age of Reform,” “Imperial Manliness,” and “Decadent Rome and Late Victorian Masculinity.” Within each section, she provides two chapters that develop nuanced analyses of complex issues and their impacts on masculinity. Two of the great accomplishments of her method are (1) her ability to synthesize vast amounts of historical material within succinct and eloquent readings of individual texts and (2) her lucid presentation of ancient traditions and transmissions for non-specialists. Her work will garner an audience amongst scholars of nineteenth-century British literature and culture and a focused group of experts within Masculinity Studies; her skillful integration of Classical texts and traditions, moreover, demonstrates the ways in which Victorian men were perpetually responding to ancient Rome.

<4>Her first two chapters take up questions of education, reading, and the empire. In Chapter 1, “Reading, Reception, and Elite Education,” Eastlake “examines representations of identity formation in boys through acts of reading and particularly through acts of learning to grapple with the Latin language” (18). She considers Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857), R.W. Farrar’s *Eric; or, Little by Little* (1858), and Rudyard Kipling’s *Stalky and Co.* (1889), demonstrating how a classical education, and specifically the acquisition and reading of Latin provided “the single most consistent, pervasive, and directed literary influence in the formative years of Britain’s elite young men” (24). In her second chapter, she focuses on the role of the writer and the act of writing within the Roman heritage. She illustrates how “the refiguration of writing as a heroic act equivalent, and even superior to fighting, held a particular appeal for Victorian culture which perceived itself to have a uniquely modern relationship with the written word” (42). Eastlake draws on classical traditions in which “the great deeds of heroes like Achilles, Aeneas, or Regulus would be nothing without the literary labours of Homer, Virgil, or Horace”; she provides an extensive reading of Kipling’s *Stalky* in which she argues that “imperial manliness needs its counterpoint in the Man of Letters—the bard who will chronicle the deeds of the imperial male” (43, 52).

<5>The chapters of Part II take up the legacy of Rome within the culture of reform. Eastlake’s work in this section is at once historically detailed and nuanced; as she shifts to the political realm, she compares it to “a gentleman’s club . . . populated by men who had shared similar educational experiences, and who could therefore draw from the same reserves of classical references to frame all manner of political conflict and allegiance” (57). But the all-too-recent uses of Rome by Napoleon and the French Revolutionaries compelled British political thinkers to manage and ultimately refigure “Rome” for an age of reform. Eastlake concludes: “In spite of its problematic radical associations, Britain was left with little choice but to reclaim the Roman parallel for British national, political, and masculine values” (63). Chapter 4 focuses specifically on the public men of Trollope and works through close readings of his Palliser or “parliamentary” novels. She specifically indicates how Trollope critiques the self-aggrandizing political figures that she associates with the tradition of Caesar and instead upholds the Ciceronian man—“a conservative force, dedicated to serving the constitution in its most ideal form” (90). I found Eastlake’s work in Part II to be the most impactful of her extraordinary

study; she helps us to re-think the importance of ideas, texts, and traditions that we knew were relevant, but she showcases complexities that we had not fully appreciated.

<6>Part III takes up questions of empire, and while portions of her arguments in Chapters 5 and 6 may rehearse material quite familiar to scholars of Victorian literature, she offers innovative readings that help us to expand our study of the period. In Chapter 5, she addresses liberal imperialism and its corresponding masculinity, most prominently “notions of paternalism and British racial hybridity” (110). Her treatment of Wilkie Collins’s *Antonina; or the Fall of Rome* (1850) showcases the breadth of the impact of ancient Rome upon nineteenth-century culture and its men. She argues that “Victorian readers could cherry-pick the best and most useful part of the Roman imperial past,” and claims that “Collins’s *Antonina* enacts a mythologization of the British imperial race . . . and specifically of the racially hybrid ‘imperial father’-figure of empire” (117-18). This reading showcases her ongoing emphasis on the reception of discourses about Rome, a technique that she continues in the next chapter in which she focuses upon New Imperialism and H. Rider Haggard’s *Cleopatra: Being an Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis* (1889). Her treatment of *Cleopatra* introduces an under-studied late-century text, helping us to appreciate how “the imperialist desire to represent Cleopatra arises from a stronger cultural need to celebrate her opposite—Caesar, and the Western imperial masculinity he signifies” (163). As Eastlake ends this third section, she reminds us that Rome, despite (and because of) its powerful association with Caesar, inevitably conveyed “narratives of decline and fall . . . cemented in the Victorian cultural consciousness by Edward Gibbon” (164), and her final section offers readings that at once affirm and complicate this tradition.

<7>Her penultimate chapter, “Rome, London, and Condemning the Metropolitan Man” addresses London as a place of “population growth, a site of overcrowding, disease, and perceived degeneration” (170). Eastlake draws on periodical material, including “A Day in Ancient Rome,” to think through parallels between the classical and contemporary cities, but her real focus is the degenerating male body. She provides an informative treatment of the decadent emperor, Nero, alongside Nordau’s famous reading of Baudelaire to explain “the extent to which Roman decadence and pathology had become interwoven” (186). Eastlake’s final chapter again highlights her ability to complicate texts and traditions we think we know. Her treatment of Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) merits specific mention and will, I hope, encourage more scholars to return to this text. She suggests that we read *Marius* “as Pater’s attempt to reclaim aesthetic manliness from the conservative narratives of degeneration, decline, and fall,” and concludes that he “offers an alternative model of decay as a perfectly natural and necessary aspect of progress and evolution” (191-92). While Eastlake could have easily offered yet another treatment of decadent poetry within the context of Roman antiquity, she continuously points to the complexity of this classical discourse.

<8>As an academic project, *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* is a massive accomplishment. Eastlake’s reach as a scholar of nineteenth-century literature and culture is extensive, and while I am in no way qualified to assess her work as a classicist, I certainly learned from her treatment of Roman antiquity. She is also a skilled reader of visual texts, and she could have easily devoted more energy to the role of visual culture in the dissemination of Roman discourses throughout the Victorian period. In her brief conclusion, she considers the importance of Rome in the preparation for and execution of World War I, noting “it was the

mutability of the Roman parallel which made Rome so continually relevant for different groups, and for a variety of national, social, aesthetic, and ideological purposes” (224). Eastlake’s work directs us to review the importance of a Roman influence upon Victorian masculinity and invites us to consider its ongoing impact on the formation of men.