

4-2008

# (Review) Nation, Empire, Decline: Studies in Rhetorical Continuity from the Romans to the Modern Era

Eric Adler

Connecticut College, eadler1@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/classfacpub>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Adler, Eric. "Nation, Empire, Decline: Studies In Rhetorical Continuity From The Romans To The Modern Era." *Classical Journal* 103.3 (2008): 345-7. Web.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact [bpancier@conncoll.edu](mailto:bpancier@conncoll.edu).

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

*Nation, Empire, Decline: Studies in Rhetorical Continuity from the Romans to the Modern Era.* By NANCY SHUMATE. London: Duckworth, 2006. Pp. 191. Paper, \$23.50. ISBN 0-7156-3551-4.

In her new book, Nancy Shumate (henceforth S.) argues that numerous scholars of modern European nationalism and imperialism see their subjects as disconnected from the ancient world. To them, certain "features of modernity"—capitalism, democracy, mass media, etc.—are inseparably linked to imperialistic and nationalistic rhetoric. S., however, aims to demonstrate that the "discourses of nationalism and imperialism" as they appear in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries "were forged in their essentials by the early Roman Imperial period" (p. 7). To this end, her book offers readings of the works of Juvenal, Horace and Tacitus that highlight similarities with modern nationalist and colonialist texts.

The introduction (pp. 7-17) establishes the parameters for the study. Recognizing that many classicists will find the connections between these ancient and modern discourses unremarkable, S. asserts that her book presents more than a tallying of similarities between Roman and modern European works; it also "reads forward, shifting the focus away from the sources of the tropes and conventions that feed into the Roman versions of these discourses and directing it toward where they seem to be going" (pp. 13-14). In this way, S. sees her work as a complement to studies that apply contemporary theoretical perspectives to ancient literature. Further, she reasonably cautions the reader against the potential pitfalls of anachronism. Still, in the introduction (and, more expansively, in the work as a whole), S. chiefly focuses on ancient and modern rhetorical similarities.

In the first chapter, "Them and Us: Constructing Romanness in the *Satires* of Juvenal" (pp. 19-54), S. explores the proto-nationalistic rhetoric in *Satires* 1, 2, 3 and 6. Overall, she stresses the ways in which Juvenal's poems "anticipate with remarkable closeness some of the modern era's more pernicious forms of nationalist othering" (p. 21). To S., Juvenal's speakers, like the authors of modern nationalist texts, disparage foreigners by associating them with women and "male gender outlaws" (p. 24). Juvenal, she avers, also focuses on foreigners as agents of contamination—another trope in modern nationalist discourse. Although recognizing that Juvenal could have been tongue-in-cheek about such associations, S. believes that these *Satires* demonstrate the ancient *bona fides* of much modern nationalist rhetoric.

Chapter 2, "Augustan Nation-Building and Horace's 'Roman' Odes" (pp. 55-79), also focuses on the ancient underpinnings of nationalism. S. argues that all of Horace's "Roman" Odes, though very different from Juvenal's *Satires*, anticipate tropes common to modern nationalist discourses. Focusing on three of these Odes (3.2, 5 and 6),

S. stresses their "idealization of the national past and the implication of issues of gender and sexuality in that process" (p. 55). To S., these poems contain many features associated with nationalistic rhetoric: for example, praise of rural life and conservative insistence on strictly maintained gender roles. In sum, she perceives sufficiently strong connections between the Horatian and modern discourses to conclude that we should "adjust our understanding of the history and development of nationalist ideology" (p. 79).

In Chapter 3, "Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Empire" (pp. 81-127), S. moves away from discussions of nationalism toward a focus on imperialism. More specifically, she uses portions of Tacitus' *Agricola*, *Germania*, *Histories* and *Annals* to highlight the ancient provenance of the Noble Savage concept and examine its relation to broader imperial themes. Overall, S. stresses the intricacies of Tacitus' ruminations on empire; his work "problematizes as much as abets the colonial process, by combining justifications of Roman hegemony with internal contradictions and complex undercurrents" (p. 83). Tacitus, she argues, criticizes both the colonizer and the colonized.

The final chapter, "'Crazy Egypt' and Colonial Discourse in Juvenal's Fifteenth Satire" (pp. 129-58), continues with the topic of imperialism, discussing the ways in which Satire 15 prefigures aspects of modern colonial discourse. Juvenal's speaker, S. argues, offers a blistering—and contradictory—attack on Egyptians, considering them both decadent and primitive. The chapter concludes with a short epilogue (pp. 155-8) that connects Juvenal's colonialist tropes to the vicissitudes of discussions of the modern Middle East.

Overall, there is much to recommend in this book. S. presents a number of striking parallels between the ancient and modern discourses on nationalism and imperialism. These parallels, furthermore, are always clearly explained and allow the reader less attuned to the literature on modern colonialism and nationalism to follow along with ease. S.'s discussion of Tacitus is particularly impressive: far from offering a black-and-white portrait of either an imperialist sinner or an anti-imperialist saint, S. ably demonstrates the ambiguities and complexities in Tacitus' *oeuvre*. In general, one detects great intellectual carefulness and self-awareness on S.'s part. She is attuned, for instance, to the complex connections between Horace's poetry and the Augustan regime.

Although S. notes that her work is intended as a preliminary study of the connections between ancient and modern discourses, her book presents important unanswered questions. S. is far from the first to trace ancient precedents to imperialism in modern Western rhetoric. In his landmark study *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argued that the West's perceptions of the East have remained largely unchanged since as far back as Aeschylus' *Persai*. This left Said open

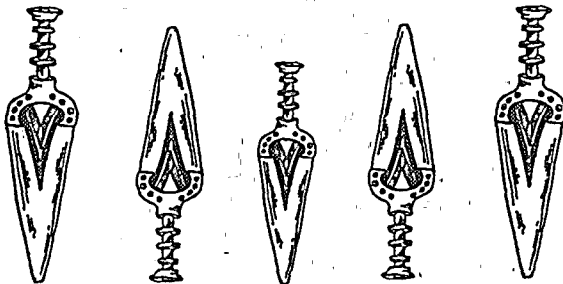
to the charge of—in Sadik Jalal al-'Azm's words—"Orientalism in Reverse": essentializing the West by making it appear as if Orientalism is an ineluctable component of the "European mind."<sup>1</sup> In her book, S. leads the reader to believe that Juvenal's colonial rhetoric differs little from that of the contemporary neoconservative intellectual Michael Ledeen. Is this not also "Orientalism in Reverse"? Does it not portray Western intellectual history as disarmingly static?

To this one might add a few pragmatic criticisms. For her discussions of modern nationalist and colonialist rhetoric, S.'s work is largely mediated through the lens of modern scholars, rather than directly transmitted. To some extent, this is unsurprising: it is unfair to expect an expert in classical antiquity to present equally insightful analyses of modern literature. Yet throughout *Nation, Empire, Decline*, the engagement with modern nationalist and colonialist discourses comes almost entirely from secondary sources. It would have been helpful if S. herself offered a close reading of a few modern texts, so that the reader would not need to rely so heavily on the parsing of others. The book also lacks a conclusion, which might have enabled S. to home in on precisely what the similarities in discourses among such chronologically disparate societies mean.

Despite these flaws, *Nation, Empire, Decline* remains a useful study of the intellectual connections between Roman antiquity and the modern world. It should compel classicists to study further the ancient precursors of modern thought, and will serve as a useful correction to scholars of modern nationalism and colonialism.

ERIC ADLER

Connecticut College



<sup>1</sup> "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin* 8 (1991) 5–26.



#### COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Nation, Empire, Decline: Studies in Rhetorical Continuity  
from the Roma

SOURCE: The Classical Journal 103 no3 F/Mr 2008

PAGE(S): 345-7

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.rmc.edu/~gdaugher/camwshp.html>