

The Lessons of Rome: English Travelers and the Eternal City in the Eighteenth Century

Throughout the eighteenth century, countless English aristocrats embarked on a rite of passage frequently referred to as 'The Grand Tour': an extended trip, often lasting several years, throughout the European continent.¹ While most of these travelers tended to be young men who had recently finished their schooling and needed something to do before settling down to lives of leisure, others had different motives for setting out upon the Grand Tour. Some went to collect priceless pieces of art, while for others a trip of this magnitude offered a first-hand opportunity to study the cultures and habits of other countries.

Although itineraries varied from traveler to traveler, the vast majority of English tourists culminated their journeys at the same destination: Rome. Many of these aristocrats have left behind written records of their experiences on the Grand Tour through journal entries and letters to family members in England, in which a visit to Rome was revealed as their real motive for leaving home. In 1705, Metcalfe Robinson, a young English traveler, wrote a letter to his father in which he called Rome "the famousest place in the world and the first motive that induced me to become a traveller."²

Robinson was not alone in his feelings about the eternal city. For many English aristocrats during this time period, the chance to see Rome was an opportunity they could not pass up. Yet

¹ The earliest use of the term 'Grand Tour,' seems to have been in 1670 by the Catholic priest Richard Lassels, who, in his *Voyage of Italy or a Compleat Journey through Italy* argued that one could not truly understand classical literature unless he can take 'the Grand Tour of France and the Giro of Italy.' For more information about Lassels and the coinage of this term, see David Watkin, "The Architectural Context of the Grand Tour: The British as Honorary Italians," in *The Impact of Italy: The Grand Tour and Beyond*, ed. Claire Hornsby. (London: The British School At Rome, 2000), 55.

² Quoted on Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 48.

Rome in the eighteenth century was not merely an isolated archaeological site, but a crowded city teeming with both people and livestock. While they might have come to Rome to see the antiquities, English tourists had to deal with the modern city as well. This juxtaposition between past and present took many of these tourists by surprise, and would have a profound influence on the way they would view their experiences after their return home. Ultimately, eighteenth-century Rome simultaneously enhanced and undermined these English travelers' feelings about their own national and cultural superiority.

Upon their first arrival in Rome, many English travelers discovered that the city of Rome, at least in its present incarnation, did not measure up to their expectations. The city was foul and fetid, its government backwards and inefficient, and its citizens impoverished and unproductive. As one such visitor, Dr. Samuel Sharp, remarked in 1766, "a man on his first arrival in Rome is not much fired with its appearance. The narrowness of streets, the thinness of its inhabitants, the prodigious quantity of monks and beggars, give but a gloomy aspect to this renowned city."³ Others were dismayed by the hazardous and dangerous nature of the city itself. Because no effort was made to light Rome's passages and byways, tourists frequently complained of "the uncomfortableness of passing through the streets after sunset."⁴ These travelers, expecting to find a Rome which compared to the images of marble temples and shining statues inextricably linked to the city's ancient past, could not help but feel disappointed at the squalid nature of the streets and buildings surrounding them.

To many English tourists, present-day Rome's physical inadequacies were linked to negligent government management. The Englishman Richard Creed made this kind of connection when he stayed in Rome during the winter of 1699-1700. "The country...of Rome turns to very

³ Quoted on Christopher Hibbert, *The Grand Tour* (London: Thames Methuen, 1987), 156.

4. ³ Quoted on Hibbert 1987: 158.

little account; there not being people to manage it," he wrote, "it is naturally low, but for want of care all is boggy; and so produces a very ill unwholesome air; the Roman government depopulates and ruins all of the country; here it ruins the soul as well as the body."⁴

These critiques of the government, people, and physical layout of the city were accompanied by numerous statements which unfavorably compared Rome to London. Although the Piazza Navona contained numerous fountains, one of which was described as "perhaps the most magnificent in Europe," one anonymous tourist noted that the plaza itself was "almost as dirty as West Smithfield where the cattle are sold in London."⁵ Henry Carr, a member of a landed family from Durham, England, made a similar observation about Rome to his brother-in-law in 1739. Thoroughly disappointed by the fact that the lower floors of great palaces had been sub-divided into small shops, Carr noted that even in the neighborhoods in which these fine homes stood by themselves, they were so "ill built [that] there is not any of them which strikes the eye at once like Grosvenor or St. James's Square, or several other squares and streets we have in London."⁶

These letters and journal entries thus have revealed a clear pattern: modern Rome had nothing to offer the sophisticated and worldly English tourist. Both the current city and its inhabitants had become so degenerate that they could no longer be of any interest to the foreigners who flocked to Rome each year. To the writer William Hazlitt, the Romans, unwilling to modernize their city by improving its physical condition, had become completely accustomed to living in the shadow of their own former greatness. In a reflection, he asked "why are the living contented to crawl about like worms, or to hover like shadows in the monuments of the dead? Every object he sees reminds the modern Roman that he is nothing--the spirits of former times

⁴ Quoted on Black 1992: 222.

⁵Quoted on Hibbert 1987: 158.

⁶ Quoted on Jeremy Black, *Italy and The Grand Tour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 162.

overshadow him, and dwarfs his pigmy efforts.”⁷ To other tourists, this lack of vitality and ingenuity, so readily apparent amongst Rome’s native inhabitants, had stymied the city’s development and would continue to hinder any further progress or modernization. According to the anonymous English author of one travel account published in 1741, the city had so deteriorated that “it is probable that in a few years both the town itself and all the neighborhood may be perfectly void of inhabitants, and, like the former Babylon, only a haunt of monsters and beasts of prey.”⁸

This devaluation of present-day Rome was linked to the assumption that England was inherently better, both in its cities and its peoples. Modern historians have identified a number of factors which might have led to English feelings of superiority when traveling abroad during this period. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the most recent Jacobite uprising of 1745-46 had been defeated, and Great Britain had triumphed over France and Spain during the Seven Years War of 1756 to 1763. This growth of cultural self-confidence was also linked to internal developments in England: the economy was improving, and population growth was once again increasing after a long period of stagnation.⁹

English tourists, most of whom were already convinced that their nation was the living embodiment of greatness, returned from their trips to Rome with these convictions strengthened. Rome, with its dirty streets and inefficient city administration, could not hope to compete with the most important cities of England; in the minds of these travelers, the problems London faced paled in comparison to those of eighteenth-century Rome. In 1763, Henry, the 2nd Viscount Palmerston, embarked upon a Grand Tour which included a stop in Rome. As he wrote upon his return home,

⁷ Quoted on Meade 1972: 317. Hazlitt’s memoirs, entitled *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy*.

⁸ Quoted on Meade 1972: 20. This account was entitled *A Short Account of A Later Journey to Tuscany, Rome, etc*

⁹ For a further discussion of these factors, see Black 2003: 6, 151-53. “This analysis has certainly reduced a complex set of historical developments into an over-simplified conclusion, but one that was attested to in the words of these travelers themselves.

he came back with “a thorough conviction of the superior value of my country and my friends in it which one cannot so properly have till one has compared them with other countries and their inhabitants.”¹⁰ Other tourists left England with the explicit goal of comparing foreign nations with their own. Peter Beckford, whose collection of letters and observations was published in 1786, wrote that although looking at pictures and statues could be a pleasant diversion, the real benefit of traveling came “in examining the laws, customs, and manners of other countries, and comparing them with our own.”¹¹ Rome, at least in its present incarnation, did not measure up to the high standards set by England and its capital city. As historian Jeremy Black has concluded, “it would not be unfair to claim that many returned to Britain as better-informed xenophobes. Tourism and travel literature reified and affirmed national identity and values, and confirmed a sense of British exceptionalism.”¹²

Yet these tourists also thought Rome contained something worthy of admiration and praise—the antiquities. Year after year they continued to make the long trek to Rome, willing to overlook the grime of the modern parts of the city for a chance to see the statues and shrines which represented Rome’s imperial past. It was these antiquities—not anything connected to Rome’s Renaissance or Baroque accomplishments—that completely enthralled English visitors. Lord Carpenter, traveling in 1717, felt that the classical relics found in Rome made this city more attractive than any other. “There is certainly more pleasure and advantages [here]...” he wrote, “above all the ancient inscriptions: ruins: and antiquitys [sic].”¹³ Even the aforementioned Dr. Sharp, who was so critical of Rome’s modern neighborhoods, changed his mind when he

¹⁰ Quoted on Black 2003: 12. Henry was an MP and on the Board of Trade, Lord of the Admiralty and the Treasury

¹¹ Quoted on Jeremy Black, *The British and the Grand Tour* (London: Croom Helm, 1985). 238.

¹² Black 2003: 12.

¹³ Quoted on Black 1985: 238.

considered the beauty and grandeur of the ruins. Once a person's attention has been turned "to the venerable remains of ancient Rome, to the prodigious collection of pictures and antique statues," he advised his fellow travelers, "you will feel more than satisfied."¹⁴

This desire to see Rome's antiquities was in part fueled by the connection made between the ever-expanding British Empire and its earlier Roman counterpart. As London extended its colonial holdings across the globe during the eighteenth century, its leaders frequently turned to the model of ancient Rome's military, political, and social dominance throughout the known world. Just as the Romans ostensibly fostered culture and civilization among the conquered peoples, this new empire gave the English the chance to do the same in the present day.

English travelers frequently reinforced this parallel between the superiority of their modern nation and that of ancient Rome through the artwork they commissioned. Over time, it became a rite-of-passage for English tourists to have their portraits painted during their stay in Rome. While these pictures served as visible reminders of their experiences on the Grand Tour, they also enabled their owners to connect themselves with Rome's ancient imperial glory. Monuments from Rome's classical period featured prominently in the backgrounds of these portraits, dominating the Italian landscape and the more recently-built attractions of the city. In many ways, James Russel's painting *British Connoisseurs in Rome* (fig.1), completed c. 1750, best exemplified these trends. Six English gentlemen, conspicuous in their particular style of dress, dominate the painting's foreground. Russel has included no trace of present-day Rome; instead these foreigner visitors have been elevated to the position of greatest importance, explicitly linked to the Coliseum and the Arch of Constantine, two of the most significant architectural achievements of ancient Rome. The artist has painted two figures—the gentleman second from the left identified as Lord Charlemont

¹⁴ Quoted on Hibbert 1987: 160.

and the bare-headed man second from the right thought to be Joseph Leeson— pointing to the arch behind, as if to declare themselves the rightful successors of Rome's imperial past by linking the two civilizations together.

At the same time, however, seeing these ruins in person gave many tourists a reason to pause and further reflect on this comparison. On April 23, 1777, Thomas Pelham, the 2nd Earl of Chichester, wrote his mother a letter in which he considered the benefits of visiting Rome. He concluded that “the great use I found is obtaining clearer ideas of the Roman magnificence than history conveys, and the reflections that must necessarily arise on the comparing our situation with theirs, with the melancholy thoughts of the imperfection and the instability of every work of man.”¹⁵ Indeed, the ruins themselves—the very buildings these tourists used to link their greatness to that of ancient Rome—actually undermined their feelings of supremacy.

By the eighteenth century, the temples and columns of ancient Rome had been neglected for hundreds of years. Left to gradually deteriorate into a profound state of decay, they eventually became visible symbols of the depths to which this once great empire had sunk. When English travelers arrived in Rome, they discovered that the poverty and rot of the more modern parts of the city were present in the ancient remains as well. The arches of the Theatre of Marcellus, filled in with all sorts of rubble, housed many poor families. Likewise, the Arch of Severus was half-buried and would not be restored to its original height for many years¹⁶. But for many of these tourists, the biggest shock came with their first glimpse of the Coliseum. As seen in Louis Decros' painting *The Interior of the Colosseum* (fig. 2), completed during the years 1787-1793, this symbol of Rome's former greatness had been overrun by plant growth which would not be removed until the

¹⁵ Quoted on Black 1985: 238.

¹⁶ For further information about the state of decay present among Rome's antiquities, see Christopher Hibbert, *The Grand Tour* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Son, 1969), 141.

nineteenth century. In addition, families could even rent out portions of the amphitheatre to house their animals, a fact which disgusted many English visitors. One such man, James Boswell, noted in his journal in 1756 that “it was shocking to discover several portions of this theatre full of dung.”¹⁷

Experiences such as Boswell’s only heightened the awareness felt by English travelers of how far this formerly-great empire had fallen. Evidence of decay and deterioration was inescapable; every part of the ancient city served as a reminder that the present could not hope to measure up with the past. It was precisely this kind of realization that inspired the historian Edward Gibbon to write his six-volume study *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* after a visit to Rome in 1764. As he later commented, “it was on the fifteenth of October in the gloom of the evening, as I sat musing on the Capitol...that I conceived the first thought of my history. My original plan was confined to the decay of the city...but several years elapsed ...before I grappled with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.”¹⁸

Observations like these made the comparison between modern England and ancient Rome extremely problematic for many visitors. If the Roman Empire, which had once ruled most of the known world, had collapsed into such decay, could not the British Empire suffer a similar fate? Questions like this continued to plague travelers and historians alike throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Catharine Edwards has pointed out, it was during this time period that the moral view of Roman history became prevalent amongst historians. According to this theory, as the Roman Empire expanded, the moral standards of its inhabitants declined. Over time avarice, luxury, and decadence had weakened the Empire from within, causing Rome to collapse long before northern tribes ever invaded the city. Since parallels were often drawn between these two

¹⁷ Hibbert 1969: 141.

¹⁸ Quoted on Hibbert 1969: 141-142.

civilizations, the British needed to be careful that their own empire did not suffer a similar fate. The decline of ancient Rome's once gleaming buildings into ruins overrun by weeds was a stark reminder that all empires must fall and, according to Edwards, "was presented as an example and warning to later civilizations."¹⁹

Although this view became increasingly popular as the British Empire continued to expand rapidly during the nineteenth century, it was already expressed in eighteenth. One particularly memorable articulation appeared in 1741, when the poet John Dyer wrote his poem "The Ruins of Rome" after a trip to Italy. In a passage echoing the sixth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Dyer writes that the British have also been given a mandate to conquer the world:

"But thou, thy nobler Britons teach to rule;
to check the ravage of tyrannick sway;
To quell the proud; to spread the joys of peace,
and various blessings of ingenious trade."²⁰

But Rome, according to Dyer, has "fall'n, fall'n, a silent heap; her heroes all/ sunk in their urns; behold the price of pomp."²¹ As the poem continues, Dyer describes how this great empire was corrupted by "soft luxurious pleasures....and fev'rish thirst of gold."²² In his closing lines, Dyer exhorts his countrymen to learn from Rome's mistakes in order to keep their own empire free from vice and true to its original mission:

¹⁹ For a further introduction to this moral view of Roman history and its relationship to the British Empire, see Catherine Edwards, "The Roads to Rome," in *Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century* eds. Michael Livsidge and Catharine Edwards. (London: Merrell Holbertson Publishers, 1996), 11-13.

²⁰ John Dyer, "The Ruins of Rome," *Poems* (London: John Hughes, 1761. Westmeade: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1969), 30. Dyer used the long s (i.e. .to lspread...and various bleffings) throughout his poem. This type setting has been modernized by the author but Dyer's original spellings preserved in their original forms.

²¹ Dyer 1761: 20.

²² Dyer 1761: 41.

O Britons, O my countrymen, beware
 Gird, gird your hearts; the Romans once were free,
 Were brave, were virtuous.---Tyranny howe'er
 Deign'd to walk forth awhile in pageant state,
 And with licentious pleasures fed the rout,
 The thoughtless many: to the wanton sound
 Of fifes and drums they danc'd...²³

For many travelers, therefore, the ruins themselves became a *memento mori*, a Latin phrase loosely translated as “remember that you will die.” The current state of decay served as a reminder of the cyclical nature of history—the Roman Empire had risen to such heights and then collapsed in on itself, destroyed by both internal and external forces. Such antiquities brought a heightened awareness of the tenuous nature of power and empire; British dominance would most likely also come to an end. Many tourists, however, often emphasized their modern connection to Rome’s past by linking themselves to these same antiquities. Although English visitors often took pleasure in considering themselves the inheritors of Rome’s imperial glory, these feelings were ultimately weakened by the parallels they themselves drew.

Eighteenth-century Rome, therefore, was a city full of contradictions for English participants in the Grand Tour. One such observer, Mariana Starke, noted this tendency in the account of her travels published in 1800. According to Starke, the abundant art and architecture in Rome “entitle her to be called the most magnificent city of Europe...her streets, nevertheless, are ill-paved and dirty; while ruins of immense edifices, which continually meet the eye, give an impression of melancholy to every thinking spectator.”²⁴ Indeed, the more recently-built parts of

²³ Dyer 1761: 43.

²⁴ Quoted on Meade 1972: 316. Her account was entitled as *Letters from Italy between the Years 1792 and 1798*.

the city, fetid with grime and inactivity, disgusted many English visitors. Comparing these neighborhoods unfavorably to London, they frequently left Rome more fully convinced of the greatness of their own nation. Yet these newly-enhanced feelings were weakened by the tendencies of these same tourists to connect themselves to the ancient Romans through their letters and artwork. The ruins, visible reminders of fact that the Roman Empire had collapsed, functioned as a warning that its British counterpart could someday suffer the same fate. Ultimately, Rome in the eighteenth century simultaneously impacted English travelers in two ways: it both enhanced and undermined their sense of cultural and national superiority.



Fig 1. James Russel, *British Connoisseurs in Rome*, c.1750, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; rpt in Andrew Wilton and Ilaria Bignamini, eds. *Grand Tour: The Lury of Italy in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1996), fig. 43, 88.



Figure 2. Louis Decros, *The Interior of the Colosseum*, c.1787-1793, Stourhead, The Hoare Collection, rpt in Wilton and Bignamini 1996: fig. 259, 297.

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