

Chiara Rolli, *The Trial of Warren Hastings: Classical Oratory and Reception in Eighteenth-Century England*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. 224. £85. ISBN 97817884539221.

This accessible book is an abundant resource for scholars and students of classical reception and its influence on political and imperial rhetoric in eighteenth-century England. Rolli takes the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal from 1773 to 1785, as a test case for how the examples of (principally Roman) orators such as Quintilian and, above all, Cicero dominated British education and legal culture, echoing in the theatrical speeches of Edmund Burke and his colleagues for the prosecution as well as in press coverage of the trial. As Rolli writes, beginning in 1786, the trial of Hastings in both Houses of Parliament for ‘High Crimes and Misdemeanours’ captivated the fashionable elite, but interest waned as the affair dragged on through the outbreak of the French Revolution, ending in acquittal in 1795. Setting aside questions of guilt and innocence, Rolli’s book examines the layers of classical influence in the trial, illuminating their significance for parliamentary oratory and, symbolically, for British rule in India.

Chapter 1 outlines the scope of classical influence among the governing elite in the eighteenth century, evoking the prominence of classical allusions in parliamentary debates and their press coverage. Rolli emphasises Cicero’s special status for the ruling class and particularly for Burke, who adopted Cicero as his ethical and oratorical model. Citing numerous contemporary biographies and translations, Rolli demonstrates that ‘vehement’ (21) debate about Cicero was the backdrop for crucial stages of the Hastings trial.

Chapter 2 compares Burke and Hastings, arguing that they derived contrasting views of the ethical rule of empire from classical study. While Burke believed with Cicero in a ‘transcendent origin of power’ (36), Hastings embraced the ‘idea of ruling the conquered by means of their own traditions’ (42). The significance of this contrast emerges in Rolli’s analysis of Burke’s speeches in Chapter 4, which elaborates how Burke’s belief in universal law inflected his rhetoric and motivated his accusation that Hastings had become ‘too Indian’ (95), adopting the practices of oriental tyrants. Though Rolli does not press the point as far as she might, this contrast between the principals illuminates how classical models shaped racialised debates about the morality of British rule.

Chapter 3 examines the ‘overlapping and intertwining’ (84) of major influences on Burke’s oratorical style, including setting and audience, personal temperament, the discourse of sympathy, and especially classical oratory and contemporary sentimental drama. Rolli argues that these latter shared an emphasis on spectacle and the need for the actor or orator to use his body as ‘a medium to express and transmit feelings’ (70). Rolli further demonstrates how the theatrical atmosphere of the trial—from the decorations of Westminster Hall to the souvenir fans and refreshment menus that circulated—solicited the prosecutors’ impassioned and sometimes hysterical delivery.

Chapter 4 analyses a transcription of Burke’s opening speech alongside Cicero’s Latin *Verrines*, in which the Roman orator denounces ex-governor Gaius Verres for his misrule of Sicily. In examining the arguments, Rolli highlights the orators’ focus on the perpetrators’ greed and cruelty, their bestiality and monstrosity, and the threat they posed to the moral and economic fate of empire. In studying stylistic features, she concentrates on Cicero’s and Burke’s use of ‘vivid descriptions’ relying on sensory details to render events as if they were ‘unfolding before the eyes of an observer’ (107). In Burke’s case, such descriptions made ‘remote suffering’ (110) seem more immediate to the Westminster audience.

Chapter 5 canvasses reception of the trial in British and English-language Indian newspapers and in satirical prints. Rolli shows how, in moments of peak interest, the press portrayed the antagonism of Burke and Hastings as a re-enactment of Cicero’s campaign

against Verres. This analysis seals Rolli's argument that ancient Greek and Roman characters were 'figures of real relevance' (131) for the wider public beyond Westminster, serving as a means of channelling questions about Britain's self-identity as an imperial power.

The Trial of Warren Hastings gathers memorable details from an impressive range of sources, including contemporary ephemera such as diaries and souvenirs. True to Burke and Cicero's examples, Rolli gives sparkling life to the world of the trial. This material merits more robust and far-reaching analysis than the book sometimes accords it, particularly with regard to the linguistic features of Burke's and Cicero's orations. Rolli's occasional over-emphasis on the affinity between oratory and theatre obscures the fact that classical rhetors taught much more than showmanship and emotional appeals. Thus, the book could distinguish more precisely between the different influences on Burke, stressing the importance of dramatic delivery and vivid description when integrated with other aspects of the complex art of rhetoric, such as logic and figurative language. However, Rolli stipulates that the book 'should be considered introductory' (136), and as such, and more, this deeply researched work opens up rich possibilities for investigation.

Mariam Wassif
The University of Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne