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**AN AMERICAN SPARTACUS: ROBERT  
MONTGOMERY BIRD'S  
THE GLADIATOR (1831) AND THE APPROPRIATION  
OF ANCIENT ROME**

**Keywords:** *Spartacus; memory site; cultural memory; imagology; identification; American theatre.*

**Abstract:** *This article explores Robert Montgomery Bird's 1831 play *The Gladiator*—a retelling of the Third Servile War, an ancient slave uprising led by the Thracian gladiator Spartacus— from the perspective of cultural memory studies and imagology. I analyze the way in which the play employs the memory of Rome and constructs a Roman image, which it puts forward for identification. Furthermore, I look at the logic of adapting and domesticating the Spartacan memory site for a 19<sup>th</sup> century American audience, while tracing the memorial context in which the play was produced (and here I explore both Spartacus' Enlightenment revival and the Early American's Republic fascination with Rome). The main question I try to answer is how historical identification works in the absence of a national self-image.*

*By 1831, Spartacus had become a known property and a new memory site had emerged around the Thracian slave and gladiator. Stressing his virtuous character and status as a rebel against absolutist tyranny, the plays, novels, statues and mentions that comprised the Spartacan memory site helped form an understanding of Spartacus that still survives to this day. Jacksonian America was a period of anti-elitist sentiment, growing democratization and burgeoning Romanticism—a propitious time for the American appropriation of Spartacus and his employment in an ideological discourse that emphasized social struggle and the toppling of established elites. But for this to work, Bird had to first make Spartacus palatable to American audiences—to domesticate him—and to achieve this he employs a number of linguistic, thematic and generic conventions, which I analyze in this article.*

In 1828, famed American actor Edwin Forrest held his annual competition to award the tragedy that best exemplified American character, whose protagonist represented “an original of this country” (Foust 36). The curious winner of the prize was Robert Montgomery Bird's *Pelopidas*, a tale of a Theban general who frees his city from foreign oppression, but Forrest deemed the play too wordy and lacking in “action” and “incident” (Foust 37), and Bird offered him a new play in 1831, on a theme both classical and bloody: *The Gladiator*, a retelling of an ancient Roman slave uprising led by the Thracian gladiator Spartacus. This adaptation of one the more influential transnational memory sites of the Age of Enlightenment went on to become one of the most successful plays in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, a country still plagued by its own problems with slavery. But what exactly was

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the discursive context which enabled *Spartacus* to be read as American original? And how exactly did audiences interact with the cultural memory of Rome?

This article also attempts to answer a series of questions which I find crucial for the application of the imagological method to the study of historical narratives, especially those that do not immediately engender the existence of a self-image. In plainer terms, I try to answer the following questions: How does the play's implied author create a space where its ideal audience can project itself? How does he collapse the distinction between hetero-image and self-image and allow the audience to see itself as both self and other, even as he creates two ostensibly distinct—and dichotomous—hetero-images (Roman vs slave). My contention here is that he has to rely on something that I have previously called “the familiarly unfamiliar” (Manea): a collection of conventions that render the historical recognizable, even as they attempt to maintain its foreign allure—and it is precisely this paradoxical dimension that *The Gladiator* makes manifest.

But first, following Joep Leerssen, I attempt to “establish the intertext of a given national representation as trope” (28), and it is here that I believe that imagology and cultural memory studies can be reconciled. Remediations such as *The Gladiator* are not the result of a transparent adaptation of historical sources, but are in fact the product of something that I have previously labeled a “memorial field” (Manea 35): a space where the various narratives, representations, and memory traditions regarding *Spartacus* and related memory sites converge. It seems very difficult to me to adapt *Spartacus* without also adapting Ancient Rome—and to do so one cannot escape relevant conventions, prior representations, and familiar themes.

*Spartacus*, and the Third Servile War as a whole, represented one of the more popular memory sites of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1831, a heroic portrayal of the Thracian gladiator had already taken root in Western imagination, one largely divorced from the ancient historical sources (which were largely written by men of the slave-owning class). *Spartacus* lent his aura to plays, novels and statues—all portraying him as an enlightened liberator, fighting tyranny in its sundry dimensions (absolutist, capitalist or imperialist, depending on which its adapter wished to denounce). However, in order to better understand the intertext of Bird's adaptation, we have to look at both the Spartacan memory site as it had evolved by 1831 and at the American Neoclassical tradition, which helped actualize this particular adaptation of the events of the Third Servile War (73-71 BC). Greek and Latin translations were widely popular in the Early American Republic and their audience went as far as to include the working class<sup>1</sup> (Malamud 46)—an important prerequisite for the huge success of the play in an age when theatre was still perhaps the only cultural institution available to all social classes. Yet Bird, a graduate of Pennsylvania University's medical school, was proficient enough in Latin to look at the original sources in his research for the play—his readings, in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Forrest, the producer and lead actor of *The Gladiator*, had a particularly fervent following among the Bowery Boys – a group of working-class political radicals, who took part in the Astor Place Riot in support of Forrest and his feud with English actor William Charles Macready over who the greater *Macbeth* was (Adams 39).

included Plutarch, Appian and Florus, the three major historical sources on Spartacus, as well as other ancient historians such as Tacitus or Livy (Foust 72).

What is more, by 1831 Spartacus had already been revived as a figure of memory and a transnational memory site had developed around him in accordance with the cultural logic of Neoclassicism. The first Enlightenment appropriation of the Thracian gladiator had taken place in France, in 1760, when Bernard-Joseph Saurin penned *Spartacus*, a tragedy that depicted the eponymous character as a great champion against absolutist tyranny. Saurin's play had inaugurated the Spartacan memory site as a discursive formation with a clear function for Spartacus (the valiant liberator) and a consistent narrative mode—tragedy with elements of romance and melodrama. A series of works in this style followed: Gotthold Lessing's *Spartacus* (1770, a fragment, never completed nor published) in Germany, Susanna Strickland's *Spartacus* (1822) in Britain, Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831) in America, and Jacob Jones' *Spartacus, or, the Roman Gladiator* (1837<sup>2</sup>) again in Britain.

As Theresa Urbaninczyk has astutely argued, of all the ancient writers it was Plutarch that most contributed to the heroic image of Spartacus (95-105). The Greek historian is careful to avoid mention of the gladiator's less savory deeds—see, for example, Appian's description of the slaughter of 300 Roman soldiers as a sacrifice to honor the death of fellow rebel leader Crixus (239)<sup>3</sup>—and indeed describes him as “more Hellenic than Thracian” (239). The Neoclassical appropriation of Spartacus thus has to be understood as the result of both Plutarch's rediscovery and immense popularity in Early Modern Europe and of the interpretative compatibility between the image of Spartacus that emerges from the historical sources and the Enlightenment paradigm. For Spartacus, in the period, is not merely a literary character, but a figure of memory: nine years after Saurin's play, Voltaire described the Spartacan rebellion as a “just war, indeed the only just war in history” (qtd. in Urbaninczyk 11), Toussaint L'Ouverture was made intelligible through the label of “Black Spartacus” (Futrell 86), and he became a symbol of the Chartist movement in Britain (Hunnings 3). By 1831, when Edwin Forrest first put on the toga to play a part that he would perform with great success for the next forty years, Spartacus was, to a certain extent, a known property.<sup>4</sup>

Yet how does this particular instantiation of the Spartacan memory site interact with the larger memory formation of Rome, how is Romanness constructed as a national trope, and what are its political uses? The Early American Republic had been an age suffused in Roman symbolism (Shalev 114): letters had been penned using Latin pseudonyms, portraits had been painted in Roman garb, and architecture had been made to mirror that of the ancients. During the war, future American president George

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<sup>2</sup> Although Jones claimed to have written it in the 1820s and that he decided to publish it only after Bird's great success (Hunnings 6).

<sup>3</sup> Although this appears not to have bothered Karl Marx all that much who upon reading Appian (in the original Greek) declared Spartacus a “real representative of the Ancient proletariat,” among other words of praise, in a 1861 letter to Friedrich Engels (qtd. in Winkler 2).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed overview, see my article “Arenas of Memory: *Spartacus* (Starz, 2010-2013) and the Remediation of Historical Narratives.” I draw on the same research here.

Washington had had his soldiers perform Joseph Addison's *Cato*,<sup>5</sup> while stationed at Valley Forge, even though theatre was ostensibly frowned upon by the Continental Congress (Bryan 134). Romanness—especially that of the Roman republic—had been associated with virtue and political legitimacy.

The appropriation of Rome in the early American republic largely followed the cultural logic of Neoclassicism, and here we can discern two components. The first could largely be described as the emulation of virtuous Romans, an ethical/political/educational component aimed at the acquisition of virtues. As Margaret Malamud notes, according to the then popular “theory of contagion, virtue or vice could be induced simply by being in the presence of an exemplary figure or in contact with one through literary description or artistic representation” (13). Take, for example, this contemporary excerpt from a poem by a 7 year old boy from *The Columbian Orator*, a widely used school reader:

These thoughts inspire my youthful mind  
To be the greatest of mankind;  
Great, not like Cesar [sic], stain'd with blood;  
But only great, as I am good. (qtd. in Malamud 13)

The speaker thus establishes that greatness resides not in violent deeds of valor and the acquisition of political power, but in moral goodness. Caesar—the villain of Addison's *Cato* and a man largely vilified at the time for ending the Roman Republic and bringing about imperial decadence—is directly mentioned as a negative example, but it bears pointing out how natural the illustration comes to the speaker: he does not reference former British enemies such as George III or General Clinton, but a man dead for more than eighteen centuries—such was the colonizing power of Rome over the Neoclassical imagination.

The second component could be described as Roman impersonation, a performative/artistic component governing the employment of virtuous action, once the virtues themselves were acquired; or to “put on the Toga” in the words of Alexander Hamilton (qtd. in Shalev 114). This had both a literal dimension—take for instance Joseph Warren wearing a toga while delivering an oration in memory of the Boston Massacre in 1775—and a figurative dimension, and here we can include the employment of Roman pen names—the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, for example, saw the appearance of “Publius” (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay) on the federalist side, and of “Cato” (George Clinton) and “Brutus” (Samuel Bryan) on the antifederalist—and the great number of statues depicting the leaders of the Revolutionary War in Roman garb.

But the Neoclassical grasp on American imagination was weakening. In 1826, famous frontiersman Davy Crockett had this to say about Sir Francis Chantrey's newly installed semiclassical statue of Washington:

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<sup>5</sup> This was the most popular play in 18th century America and it inspired a great deal of famous revolutionary quotes including Patrick Henry's “Give me liberty, or give me death!” and Nathan Hale's “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country” (Shalev 100).

I did not like the statue of General Washington in the state-house [in Boston]. They have a Roman gown on him, and he was an American; this ain't right. They did a better thing in Richmond, in Virginia, where they have him in the old blue and buff [the colors of the Continental Army]. He belonged to this country—heart, soul, and body: and I don't want any other to have any part of him—not even his clothes. (qtd. in Richard 109)

This counternarrative of American exceptionalism and nativism exemplified by Davy Crockett's words had a long history on the stage, from Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) to Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (1844).<sup>6</sup> It was consonant with the ideology of Jacksonian democracy and stressed the corruptness of city life (and what greater city is there than Rome?)—and would later find its fulfillment in American Romanticism and Transcendentalism. In the works of Emerson and Thoreau, Americanness came to be associated with an Arcadian ideal, which was geographically located in the rustic countryside, away from corrupt metropolitan centers. Ignorant as Davy Crockett's words might seem, they reveal an important paradigm shift in the American imagination. Republican ideals—the cultivation of “natural aristocrats” (Jefferson), a fascination with optimates, the Roman elite, such as Cato—became unfashionable in Jacksonian America, as a gradual shift occurred from republicanism to democracy. Interest for narratives dealing with Roman subject matter didn't so much wane but change with regard to which heroes were privileged: both the oligarchical Roman Republic and the Empire came to be seen as corrupt, and the populares and those that fought against Roman corruption, such as Spartacus, came into fashion. And nowhere was this shift felt more sharply than on the stage.

Theatre was crucial for American cultural memory and identity formation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it was, by most accounts, the most inclusive (yet hierarchical) cultural institution. As Malamud notes:

In the theatre, the typical layout was a tripartite division into a gallery, where poor working men, servants, blacks, and prostitutes sat; the pit, for the “middling” classes; and the boxes, for those with the most money. Walt Whitman went to the Bowery Theatre in New York City around 1840 and sat in the pit, where he was surrounded by the ‘slang, wit, occasional shirt sleeves, and picturesque freedom of looks and manners, with a rude, good-natured and restless movement’ of firemen, mechanics, and butchers. Looking up at the Bowery's boxes, Whitman saw ‘the faces of the leading authors, poets, editors, of those times’. (36)

Plays thus had to appeal to a great variety of people from different walks of life. More than any other medium, they exemplified paradigm shifts and passing trends—the theatre had to reflect what was going on in the country. In 1831, besides Spartacus, Edwin Morris inhabited the role of another rebel against elite rule: Caius Marius in the eponymous play by Robert Penn Smith (Malamud 44); and three years later, he would play the part of Virginius in the eponymous play by James Sheridan Knowles (Malamud 44)—a father who has to kill his daughter to protect her from the interests of rapacious

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<sup>6</sup> Anna Cora Mowatt's play *Fashion* (1844) is a fine example of this paradigm shift: its hero Adam Trueman, “a farmer from Catteraugus” is cast in stark contrast with the wily European charlatans who wish to fleece his family friends.

proto-capitalists. Other plays that deal with the theme of rebellion against elite oppression include Louisa Medina's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1835), and Nathaniel Bannister's *Gaulantus* (1836). These are just some of the intertexts reflected in Bird's play, but they do indicate a growing anxiety regarding Roman subject matter, which—while still able to engender identification, by dint of its great importance to cultural memory and by its Neoclassical consecration—no longer necessarily stood for virtue and legitimacy, but came to be associated with the corruption commonly attributed to Europe, at least in its aristocratic dimension.

That is one half of the answer of how *The Gladiator* creates a space where its readers can project themselves without the existence of an ostensible self-image. The other half lies, I think, in its formal construction, in the conventions it employs to domesticate the Spartacan memory site and to make it relatable. In *The Gladiator* we can discern three main strategies by which the play domesticates the Roman subject. The first is a linguistic strategy by which characters are made to talk in Elizabethan fashion—then still the language of tragedy—replete with words such as “sirrah” (319), “pr’ythee” (328), and “hark” (319). Even the highly anachronistic “sblood” (302)—a shortening of the Christian “God’s blood”—makes an appearance. And, furthermore, the play still maintains the “thou-you” distinction, which is even employed dramatically: at one point, a still captive Spartacus refuses to kneel in front of Consul Crassus, replying: “Kneel thou, whose servile soul/Was given for crouching. I am here to fight!” (341). Through language the play localizes Romanness in a specific English historical context, one still fresh in the mind of its audience; it familiarizes it without rendering it contemporary. The second strategy is a generic one by which the subject matter is emplotted in a manner palatable to 19<sup>th</sup> century American audiences: the play largely respects the Shakespearian tragic model in disregarding the unities of time and space, to which elements of melodrama—so popular on stage at the time—are added (a reliance on coincidence to resolve plot points, a number of violent action set-pieces, and a general affective heightening). Thirdly, a thematic strategy is employed, by which the characters are made to give voice to topics relevant to the contemporary audience. Much like in the case of Saurin’s French adaptation, the republic is depicted as imperialistic, venal and corrupt (although here it is emblematic of American anxiety about their European cultural baggage) and Spartacus’ rebellion is depicted as a remedy for its many ills.

The character of Spartacus himself is domesticated in a number of important ways. He is given a family, which is nowhere to be found in the historical sources: a father by the name of Menalon, a mother by the name of Laodice, and a brother by the name of Phasarius (the first two names are of Greek origin and the third is invented for the play and it resembles a Romanized Greek name as it begins with the evocative ‘ph’ sound, perhaps in reference to Plutarch’s comment above, although they also serve to ennoble the Thracian Spartacus and to suggest—via Ancient Greece’s importance to cultural memory—that his views are equally legitimate). Keeping with the melodramatic conventions of the time, he is also given a wife and a son, who represent his main reasons for fighting, rather than abstract concepts such as liberty or equality. The play, in fact,

goes to great lengths to sideline the issue of slavery, then so troubling in America, as the rebellious slaves refer to themselves as “bondmen”—indentured servants (like the forefathers of many white Americans who had arrived there in the colonial period). Literal domesticity is emphasized, as Spartacus, prior to his enslavement, had been a shepherd (symbolizing both Christianity and the American emphasis on rusticity as its quintessential quality). And Spartacus is also in many ways encoded as recognizably Christian—he worships “the Only Master” (372), “the great God” (389), only to then casually thank “the gods”, which is, of course, more historically accurate—one of the many consequences of the paradox of being at once familiar and strange.

It is interesting for the purpose of this article that the play ends with the following lines by Crassus, Spartacus’ victorious adversary, spoken after the rebel leader had fallen in battle against the Romans:

Thy bark is wreck'd, but nobly did she buffet  
These waves of war, and grandly lies at last,  
A stranded ruin on this fatal shore.  
Let him have burial; not as a base bondman.  
But as a chief enfranchised and ennobled.  
If we denied him honour while he lived,  
Justice shall carve it on his monument. (440)

The Romans swear to raise a monument to the defeated Spartacus, much like the play itself represents a monument raised to him by an American playwright. This is perhaps Bird’s greatest distortion of historical fact—in reality, Spartacus’ body was never found and 6000 slaves were crucified on Crassus’ orders along the Appian Way (Urbainczyk 78)—and it further serves to suggest that the play’s construction of Romanness is merely a camouflaging of Americanness, one that allows the author to give voice to concerns critical to his own time. With this final gesture, *The Gladiator* achieves a reconciliation between the Roman elite and the rebellious bondsmen—between the optimates so often inscribed in contemporary collective memory as symbolic of America’s own political elite and the populares and their fellow-travellers, who had come to represent the rising populist voices of Jacksonian democracy. The gap between past and present is finally bridged and the play invites audiences to project their ways of seeing and understanding the world upon the past—and to bring that past back to life as a translucent reflection of the present. While perhaps drained of its Neoclassical authority, Rome still functions as a potent focus for identification.

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