

Tacitus between Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft

In 1790, Edmund Burke published his letter entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (the second of two letters he sent to Charles-Jean-François Depont). In it, Burke used a range of ancient sources to discuss the nature of revolution and the various repercussions of changes to forms of government. Latin quotations from Juvenal, Horace, Terence, Cicero, Virgil, and Lucan are scattered throughout (unattributed by Burke), but only Tacitus is namechecked in the main text for his political theory.¹ Tacitus is invoked by Burke as a historian who recognised differences in forms of ‘equality’ in relation to how societies are structured. Burke uses *Annals* 1.14 to argue that while different strata of society could live together (as Roman military colonies show), they needed to be structured in such a way as to ensure the mutual understanding of a pre-determined hierarchy. Revolution, on the other hand, sees strangers endeavour to create an ‘equal’ society that is not based on a solid foundation. In this, as well as elsewhere in his *Reflections*, Burke argues the conservative viewpoint, one that is underpinned by Tacitean (even if not only Tacitean) political criticism. This is, then, the ‘Black Tacitus’, the one that reinforces a social hierarchy, but also the one that draws attention specifically to ancient and novel conceptions of equality and its complicated relationship with liberty.

A few weeks later, Mary Wollstonecraft responds to Burke in a letter, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in which she highlights the utility of Rome contingent on its employment for the republican cause. While warning Burke of the deleterious effect of his ‘servile reverence for antiquity’, she suggests that a ‘young history painter’ might ‘imitate without copying those great originals’. This paper will explore how such arguments function as a refutation of Burke, while also acting as a way of surpassing Burke in his utilisation of classical theory. Burke misunderstands, Wollstonecraft intimates, those that he copies. Invoking indirectly the idea of the ‘Red Tacitus’, she reminds us that liberty cannot exist if the aristocracy remains corrupt. Moreover, it is important, as Isabelle Bour argues, to take Wollstonecraft seriously as a historian and a reader of historiography. In 1794, Wollstonecraft published *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe*. As a historical essay on the Revolution, Wollstonecraft discusses ‘grand narrative’ themes such as ‘natural causes’, ‘fixed systems’, and ‘moral effects’. Through *Vindication* and *Historical and Moral View*, this paper will also explore versions of Tacitean conceptions of liberty, and how they sit more or less comfortably with eighteenth-century debates on equality.

¹Cicero appears, but for his ‘ludicrous’ interpretation of Cato.