THE CENSORING OF PLUTARCH'S GRACCHI ON THE REVOLUTIONARY FRENCH AND REFORMIST ENGLISH STAGES, 1792–1823

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Tiberius and Caius Gracchus, immortalized in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, were the sons of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, who had held the prestigious public office of *censor*. In this honoured role, one of his most important duties was the overseeing of public morals, the *Regimen Morum*. This responsibility included the duty of policing the acting profession (Livy 7.2), which in ancient Rome was regarded as more or less disgraceful. Theatre and censor have been as intimately linked in more recent times. By 1644, Milton in his *Areopagitica* 21 used the word to mean specifically someone invested with the power to exclude intellectual ideas from the public domain; he described Cato the Censor, who had tried to exclude the Sceptics and Cynics and their ideas from Rome, eventually relenting: 'the censor himself at last, in his old age, fell to the study of that whereof before he was so scrupulous'. But it was words spoken in the British theatre of which the notorious Licensing Act of 1737 institutionalized the censorship until 1968. This was a response not to dangerous philosophical or even religious ideas, but specifically to the vilification of government (at the time, Robert Walpole's administration) or the monarchy in the theatre.

In Britain, several plays based on ancient Greek myth and especially Greek tragedy ran into problems with the censor, as did Aristophanes in both Britain and the different political context of revolutionary France.[1] But plays based on ancient *historical* figures were just as susceptible to the blue pencil. This article concerns the Gracchi, Tiberius and Caius Gracchus, known chiefly through Plutarch's *Lives*, on the stages of both Britain and France. But it also concerns censorship, which plays about these Republican Roman brothers provoked in both countries — indeed, views on the Gracchi, we argue, constitute a kind of thermometer for assessing the temperature of political sentiment during times of struggle between rich and poor. The first play is Marie-Joseph Chénier's *Caius Gracchus* (1792), and the second is James Sheridan Knowles' Anglo-Irish *Caius Gracchus* (1815). Knowles, as a man of the theatre and an Irish radical, was fully acquainted with the French stage repertoire, and the story of the two plays is one of a particular kind of reception of classics — the chain of receptions specifically within the world of *theatre*,[2] and politically self-conscious theatre treating episodes from ancient history at that. It is a form of reception of the ancient world typical of what Eric Hobsbawm labelled simply 'The Age of Revolution', *i.e.*

[1] For the long and complicated story of the British case, affecting plays on Agamemnon, Electra, and especially Oedipus, see E. Hall and F. Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660–1914* (Oxford 2005) index *s.v.* 'censorship'. For the censoring of Aristophanic comedy in France, see C. Orfanos, 'Revolutionary Aristophanes?', in *Aristophanes in Performance 421BC–AD 2007*, eds E. Hall and A. Wrigley (Oxford 2007) 106–16.

[2] On the peculiar characteristics of this form of reception see E. Hall 'Towards a theory of performance reception', *Arion* 12 (2004) 51–89; revised version in *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, eds E. Hall and S. Harrop (London 2010) 10–27.

Figure 1. François Jean-Baptiste Topino-LeBrun's Death of Caius Gracchus. Image in public domain; painting now in Marseilles Museum of Fine Arts.

1789–1848.[3] It is the reception of one progressive dramatist's response to another's breathing of stage life into historical figures from antiquity, identified as their and (by implication) their audience's political forebears.

Plutarch's account of the death of Caius Gracchus is so inherently visual and theatrical that several classical scholars have argued that there must have been an ancient play on the theme which had affected the discourse long before Plutarch's seminal contribution.[4] The death scene became a popular theme in French painting in the years immediately before and after the revolution,[5] most famously in Topino-LeBrun's 'Death of Caius Gracchus' (1792, first exhibited 1798) (fig. 1). Yet the theatrical potential of the Gracchi had not been discovered until relatively late in the evolution of the modern history play. Valerius Maximus' praise of the loyalty Gaius Blossius showed towards Tiberius Gracchus (*Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 4.7) was a popular exemplum in medieval and Renaissance discussions of friendship.[6] Renaissance and early modern authors also recycle Valerius Maximus' quotation of the mother of the Gracchi, Cornelia, claiming that they were her jewels (4.4, *praefatio*). The rhetorical styles of the two brothers are often contrasted in handbooks on oratory. But unlike Alexander the Great, Cato, Julius Caesar, or Pompey, the Gracchi produced little response in the Renaissance or early modern European theatre. The sole

[3] The title of his classic study: E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London and New York 1962).

[4] *E.g.* J. L. Beness and T. W. Hillard, 'The theatricality of the deaths of C. Gracchus and friends', *Classical Quarterly* 51 (2001) 135–40.

[5] Already in 1787 Jean-Germain Drouais, a student of David, was drawing a design for a painting of the death of Caius Gracchus, which his death in 1788 prevented him from completing. For this theme in French revolutionary art J. H. Rubin, 'Painting and politics, II: J.-L. David's patriotism, or the conspiracy of Gracchus Babeuf and the legacy of Topino-Lebrun', *The Art Bulletin* 58 (1976) 547–68.

[6] R. Hyatte, *The Arts of Friendship: The Idealization of Friendship in Medieval and Early Renaissance Literature* (Leiden 1994) 34.

opera about either of them seems to be *Caio Gracco* by the young Leonardo Leo, performed at the palace of his patron, the Viceroy of Naples, in 1720.[7]

The reason why the Gracchi did not become stage heroes seems to have been connected with the tendency of their stories to set off political alarm bells. The ancient view of the Gracchi which dominated medieval, Renaissance, and early modern responses to the Gracchi as political agents was the seminal chapter 24 of Augustine's *City of God*, Book 3. Augustine did acknowledge that there was some unfairness in the stranglehold of the nobility on public land. But the programme of land reform pursued by both the Gracchi, was — according to Augustine, echoing most previous Latin authors — seditious and resulted in fearful destruction, unleashing the violence of the Civil War, with riots, mobs, and bloody massacres.[8] Augustine's characterization of their actions as sedition resulting in chaotic bloodshed can be found everywhere in texts before the eighteenth century — from Machiavelli's argument that they may have been right, but were completely ineffective, to British Restoration apologists for the absolute monarchy, who routinely cited Plutarch's *Life* of Tiberius Gracchus as evidence for the sort of terrible sedition and anarchy that arose with any sort of republican or democratic constitution.[9]

The Gracchi, perhaps surprisingly, do not even seem to have been widely adopted by Parliamentarians during the English Civil War,[10] although the first identifiable admirers of the Gracchi had been reforming Protestants of the early sixteenth century. A picture of the Gracchi radically different from that derived from Augustine seems first to have emerged from the pen of Johann Eisermann (also known as Johannes Ferrarius Montanus), who was Rector of Marburg, the first Protestant University to be founded without papal permission. He paraphrases Plutarch eloquently when discussing the problem of tyranny in his work on the good ordering of a commonwealth, *De re publica bene instituenda, parainesis* (1556), the first edition of which had been published in 1533. The English translation by William Bavande, published three years after the 1556 edition, was a foundational text for English Protestantism. Eisermann responds to details in Plutarch's *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* in an identifiably more sympathetic way, for example in his account of the process by which Tiberius comes to identify so passionately with the cause of the Italian poor is presented in more emotive, indeed *dramatic* detail:

[7] There are two operas about another member of the Gracchan dynasty, entitled *Tito Sempronio Gracco*, performed in Naples in February 1702 (by Domenico Scarlatti) and 1725 (by Domenico Natale Sarri).

[8] 'The civil wars began with the seditions which the Gracchi aroused concerning the agrarian laws, for they wanted to divide among the people the lands which were wrongly occupied and owned by the aristocracy. But to change such a longstanding inequity was a dangerous — indeed, as it turned out, wholly destructive — endeavour. For what massacres occurred when the older Gracchus was killed! What massacres happened when the younger brother suffered the same fate not long afterwards? For aristocrats and commoners were slaughtered indiscriminately, and their deaths were not inflicted with legal authority and due process, but by mobs and armed rioters. When the younger Gracchus had been killed, the consul Lucius Opimius, who had fought against him inside the city, and after defeating him and many of his associates had put them to death, now slaughtered many citizens, set up a judicial inquisition of others, and is held to have had as many as three thousand men killed. From this it can be inferred what vast numbers must have died in the conflict of the armed mobs, when even a judicial enquiry resulted in so much bloodshed. The man who assassinated Gracchus himself sold his head to the consul for its weight in gold, for this was the agreement they had made before the deed was carried out. It was during this massacre that Marcus Fulvius, a man of consular rank, was put to death along with his children'. (Our translation).

[9] Macchiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* 1.37; J. Wilson, *A discourse of monarchy more particularly of the imperial crowns of England, Scotland, and Ireland according to the ancient, common, and statute-laws of the same: with a close from the whole, as it relates to the succession of His Royal Highness James Duke of York* (London 1684) 48.

[10] Yet John Evelyn, the English translator of Lucretius Book 1, gardener, and diarist, did reveal the possibility that Caius Gracchus might be due for a reappraisal when he wrote in 1667, after the Restoration allowed him to restart his public career, that Caius Gracchus was *rightly* criticized for retreating from public life after his brother's death. See J. Evelyn, *Publick employment and an active life prefer'd to solitude and all its appanages, such as fame, command, riches, conversation, &c. in reply to a late ingenious essay of a contrary title* (London 1667) 23.

> Likewise, when Tiberius Gracchus returned from Numantia, where he had born the office of Questor, euerie where as he went through Italie, had pitifull complaintes, and heauy lamentacions of the pore for the same cause. The women all dismaied, and welnigh deade for honger, mette him in the way, beseching him to reliue their miserie, bringing for he their pore children, whiche they saied that thei would rather had neuer bene borne, then so to be consumed awaie, and to pearishe with soche a deathe of all other most miserable. The men also shewed their woundes which thei had receiued for the common weales sake, saiynge, that where as thei had well hoped, that after they hadde taken soche paines, and spente so moche of their bloude in vanquishinge of their enemies, that at the length they should haue liued peaceablie and quietly at home. Where as now contrariwise, thei were enforced to fight with extreme honger, an enemie as most cruell, so moste vntollerable. And that the breakinge vp of the warres whiche was comfortable to others, as an ende of their trauailes, was to them the beginning of their calamitie, and that thei had rather haue died in the fielde, or vppon those vsurers, then to haue hearde those rufull complaintes of their wiues and children, so perishinge and steruinge for verie fa|mine. Where with Gracchus beinge moued, and hauinge compassion of the people, caused a lawe to be ordained […].[11]

This is stirring stuff, and scarcely surprising, given that Eisermann began writing the book in the 1520s, only a decade after the Peasants' Revolt had rocked central Europe and bitterly divided the Protestant leadership. He was a jurist who was primarily interested in working out what kind of legislature would work in a Protestant welfare state, and he gave very austere prescriptions to those who would lay claim to leadership of this ideal Christian polity.

Yet the very same book answers the question why the Gracchi did not become *stage* heroes until so much later. For Eisermann, however much he admired Tiberius Gracchus, deplored the theatre and all its arts. In the same book, he published his view that both players and spectators were rendered equally immoral in the process of watching theatre, the players for exhibiting 'the filthiest matters', and the hearers for acquiescing in the 'occasion of voluptuousness'. To put the matter in a nutshell, until the eighteenth century, the only circles who read Plutarch's Gracchi as politically positive exemplary heroes were the very circles whose systematic anti-theatricalism ensured that the Gracchi were never to mount the stage.

The change came in the early eighteenth century, when Pierre Fatio, from a family of upper-class Protestant refugees from France, led demands for a widened franchise in Geneva and was secretly executed after being arrested during the Geneva revolt of 1707. He was almost immediately labelled the 'Gracchus' of the Swiss, and thereafter elevated to heroic status by the more adventurous French thinkers, especially Rousseau. The Gracchi, at around this moment, begin to become acceptable, at least on the radical wing of the European Enlightenment. By 1719, a more balanced appraisal of the Gracchi can be found creeping into scholarly publications in France, where the Abbé de Vertot, in *Les révolutions de la république romaine*, attempts to give a balanced account, using all the ancient sources,[12] and even-handedly emphasizing the faults and mistakes of both the senate and the Gracchi.[13] In French authors, from this moment on, it became possible to read the political position of writers from the views they expressed on the Gracchi.

The première of Chénier's *Caius Gracchus* in the Théâtre de la République on 9 February

[11] The translation by W. Bavande: *A vvoorke of Ioannes Ferrarius Montanus, touchynge the good orderynge of a common weale wherein aswell magistrates, as priuate persones, bee put in remembraunce of their dueties, not as the philosophers in their vaine tradicions haue deuised, but according to the godlie institutions and sounde doctrine of christianitie* (London 1559) 7.144.

[12] Valerius Maximus, Livy, Cicero, Plutarch, Florus, Velleius Paterculus, Tacitus, Sallust.

[13] See the English translation in Vertot, abbé de, *The History of the Revolutions that Happened in the Government of the Roman Republic*, Eng. trans. (London 1720) II 108–18. It was also in 1720 that the single operatic attempt to turn either of the Gracchi into heroes was attempted by Leonardo Leo in Naples.

1792 proved to be the first of twenty-nine performances of this important play in revolutionary Paris.[14] Chénier used the play to showcase 'the virtues of the defenders of liberty' and so it became central to the revolutionaries' programme of propaganda;[15] selected in 1793 as one of three plays in the officially recommended patriotic repertoire.[16] Performances of this play were 'nothing short of political events' and had a palpable impact on the revolutionaries who watched it.[17] The revolutionary agrarian reformer Babeuf would take the name Gracchus, in place of his Christian names François-Noël Toussaint Nicaisse, as part of the 'de-Christianization' movement of autumn 1793.[18] He had previously preferred the pseudonym 'Camillus', in imitation of the Roman statesmen of the fifth–fourth centuries BC, the Tribune of the People and so-called Second Founder of Rome. But by October 1794, he had penned a manifesto polemicizing against tyranny and pleading for the sovereignty of the people, in which he describes himself as 'Gracchus Babeuf, people's tribune, defender of the rights of man, of press freedom, and other freedoms'.[19] Like Caius Gracchus, politics were to prove the end of Gracchus Babeuf. He led the secret society Conspiracy of Equals and ended under the guillotine in 1797, accused of wanting to overthrow the government, and is often identified by historians as the first modern communist.

Babeuf's special affinity with the Gracchi suggests a familiarity with Plutarch's account of their lives (probably in translation) even before his encounter of Chénier's dramatization of it.[20] However, most French readers' first encounter with the Roman revolutionary brothers before 1792, despite the availability of Plutarch's *Lives* in the vernacular,[21] would have come through popular

[14] The majority of performances (twenty-six out of twenty-nine) were in the Théâtre Français (also known by the names, Théâtre de la République and Théâtre de la rue Richelieu). Caius Gracchus was the third most performed of Chénier's plays (following *Charles IX*, performed sixty-two times, and *Fénelon*, performed an outstanding 141 times). Performances of *Caius Gracchus* make up a tenth of the overall total for performances of Chénier's plays. Pierre Daunou, a contemporary of Chénier, suggests that performances ran between 1792–94; see M.-J. Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes de M.-J. Chénier, précédées d'une notice sur Chénier par M. Daunou*, 3 vols (Paris 1824) III. For full details of the performance record see *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris Analysis and Repertory*, eds E. Kennedy *et al.* (Westport, CT 1996) 125.

[15] For Chénier's work as 'propaganda' see H. C. Ault, '"Charles IX, ou l'école des Rois": tragédie nationale', *The Modern Language Review* 48 (1953) 398–406 (398).

[16] On 2 August 1793 the National Convention published a decree prescribing approved republican plays to be performed three times a week in the period 4 August–1 September 1793 and promising government subsidy for one performance per week. *Caius Gracchus* is named, with *Brutus* and *Guillaume Tell*; discussed briefly in *Theatre*, eds Kennedy *et al.* (n. 14, above) 87. The quotation comes from the decree of the Convention, 2 August 1793, which indirectly describes the play in these terms; for wording of decree see 'A. C.' 'Le répertoire révolutionnaire de la citoyenne Montansier' *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 2 (1895) 82.

[17] C. Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution* (Ashgate Publishing (e-book) 2013). Feilla and Kennedy *et al.* (*Theatre* [n. 14, above]) both challenge *Caius Gracchus*' centrality in scholarship on revolutionary theatre. While Kennedy *et al.*'s work has offered an important reassessment of the theatrical repertoire in the period, Chénier's *Caius Gracchus* nevertheless remains significant for what it reveals about the political agenda of its time and for the role it played in the afterlife of Plutarch.

[18] H. T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago 1937) 140–41; performances of Chénier's play were at their peak in precisely this period (when patriotic plays dominated at the expense of the otherwise dominant genre comedy, see M. L. Netter in *Theatre*, eds Kennedy *et al.* [n. 14, above] 59) and the first point of reference for Babeuf's allusion to the Gracchi would arguably therefore have been this dramatic realization.

[19] D. Caute, *The Left in Europe Since 1789* (New York 1966) 124; Rubin, 'Painting and politics' (n. 5, above) 551.

[20] P. Russell, 'Babeuf and the Gracchi: A comparison of means and ends', *Melbourne Historical Journal* 36 (2008) 41–57 (43).

[21] The standard translation in this period was by André Dacier (*Les Vies des Hommes Illustres de Plutarque. Traduites en François avec des remarques* [Paris 1721]). His complete works of Plutarch (including *Lives*) was first published in 1721 (though he had already published six of Plutarch's *Lives* in 1694: Theseus, Romulus, Lycurgus, Numa Pompilius, Solon, Publicola). Amyot's translation, first produced in 1559, was still in use, but Dacier's outnumbered it by more than two to one in this period; see Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity* (n. 18, above) 29.

compilations of Roman history. Amongst these, Charles Rollin's *Histoire Romaine* (first printed 1738–48) stands out both for its unbelievable popularity and for its outspoken condemnation of the Gracchi.[22] While Rollin takes parts of his account of the *Lives* of the Gracchi *verbatim* from Dacier's translation of Plutarch, his comments on the story offer a radical divergence from it.[23] He asks how they can be excused for their attack on the senate, 'the soul of the Republic', and for depriving that august company of its precious and legitimate rights. There is no question in Rollin's mind that the Gracchi abused their position and their natural talents. He also makes this felt through interpolations to Plutarch's narrative to undermine the reader's sympathy for the Gracchi. So, for example, Plutarch's moment of *pathos* and powerful ambiguity where Caius Gracchus weeps at his father's statue is hijacked by Rollin and used to suggest Caius' regret at not following his father's example in supporting the aristocratic party.[24] In a later aside, Rollin condemns the people for not defending Caius at the moment of his death and suggests that it proves the fragility of popular support.[25] In short, Rollin uses the historical narrative to offer a politically engaged cautionary tale in which the Gracchi provide a negative example.

While Chénier's play in 1792 would, like Rollin, offer an ideologically charged version of the story, importantly for the reception of Plutarch it would at the same time do much to reinstate a sympathetic view of the Gracchi. Chénier will probably have felt an unusual affinity with ancient Greek authors, since his mother was an upper-class Greek from Constantinople, where he was actually born; a fact celebrated in his public profile (fig. 2). During his school days at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, he would have encountered a broad range of classical authors including: Virgil, Horace, Livy, Cicero, Phaedrus, and possibly also Sallust, Cornelius Nepos, Quintus Curtius, Ovid, and Tacitus.[26] His first encounter with the story of the Gracchi, and by extension with Plutarch, may have been through Heuzet's Latin adaptations of historical stories, Vertot's history of revolutions, and Montesquieu's study of the Romans which were the standard texts used in Parisian colleges.[27] The Gracchi are given scarce mention in Montesquieu's account but both Heuzet's and Vertot's treatments seem to have influenced Chénier's later response to Plutarch. While Plutarch's *Lives* itself did not feature on the school syllabus, the revolutionaries were clearly familiar with this work.[28] Chénier could have accessed the *Lives* through Dacier's translation or even in the original (since he was capable of reading Sophocles and producing a translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*).[29]

[22] Rollin's *Histoire romaine* (C. Rollin, *Histoire romaine, depuis la fondation de Rome jusqu'*à la bataille d*'Actium*, 16 vols [Paris 1738–48]) 'fed a ravenous popular demand': M. N. S. Sellers, 'The Roman Republic and the French and American revolutions', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. H. I. Flower (Cambridge 2004) 347–64 (355). Further editions appeared in Paris in 1752, 1755 (abridged), 1758–68, 1765–76, 1771, and 1782, and English translations in London in 1739, 1754, and 1768; for Rollin's significance in America, see C. Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity* (New York 2007) 26–29.

[23] For the closeness of Rollin's wording to Dacier's, see, for example, the description of Caius' retreat to the Temple of Diana. Rollin, *Histoire* (n. 22, above) V 257: 'Pour Caïus, personne ne le vit combattre, ni tirer l'épee. Très affligé de tout ce qui se passait, il se retira dans le temple de Diane'. Here Rollin differs from Dacier only in his choice of punctuation! This is in striking contrast to Vertot (n. 34, below), who pens this passage in his own words.

[24] Plutarch, *Caius Gracchus* 35.14.4, *cf.* Rollin, *Histoire* (n. 22, above) V 254.

[25] Rollin, *Histoire* (n. 22, above) V 257. In both cases, Rollin signposts the moral by referring to the *exemple* being offered.

[26] Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity* (n. 18, above) 11–14; despite the age of this study, Parker's research remains seminal.

[27] Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity* (n. 18, above) 11–14.

[28] Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity* (n. 18, above) 18–19.

[29] Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) II 487–551. He also produced an *Oedipus rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and an unfinished *Electra*, but while these respond to Sophocles they are described as imitations rather than translations, see Daunou's comments in his introduction: Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) I vi–vii.

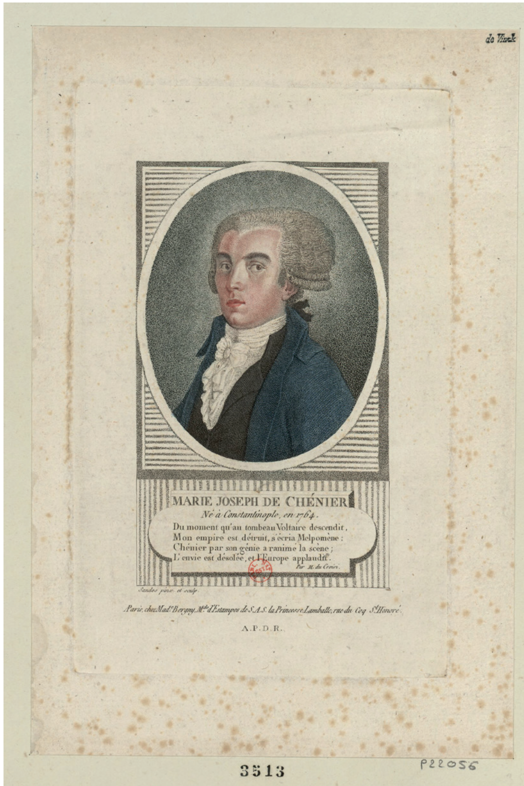


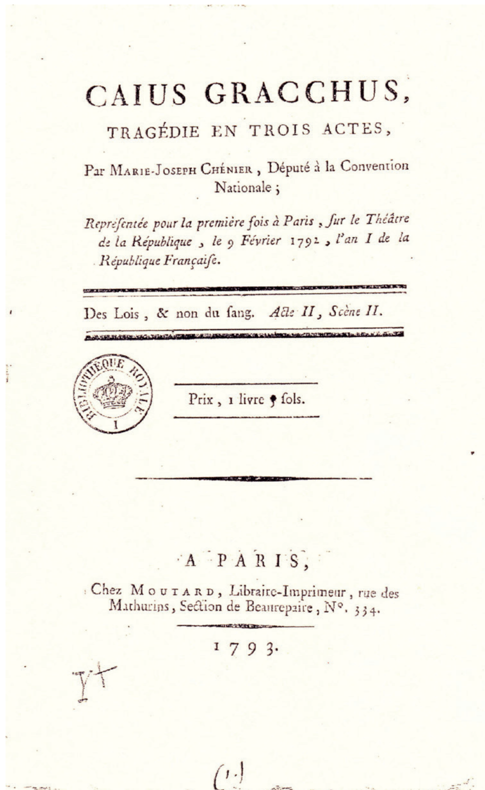
Figure 2. Print of Marie Joseph Chénier by Auguste Sandoz c. 1789. Produced courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Chénier's play makes significant changes to Plutarch's narrative while retaining its sympathetic spirit and drawing on its finely drawn characters. The action of *Caius Gracchus* begins at the end of the night after the lictor, Quintus Antyllius, has been killed and so begins at roughly 35.14 of Plutarch, although motifs from elsewhere in Plutarch's narrative are incorporated into the play.[30] The characters are as anyone versed in Plutarch would expect: Licinia is weak and tries to persuade Caius to act dishonourably for her own interests; Cornelia spurs Caius on to glorious action (whatever the cost); Fulvius pushes for violence; Caius is moderate and honourable; Opimius is tyrannical; and Drusus is corrupt. Chénier adapts Plutarch to offer his hero the maximum opportunity to demonstrate his self-sacrifice for liberty and the Roman people. In his version Caius hands over his own son as a hostage at the demand of the Senate, to stop any harm from coming to the people (Act II, scene 3). He puts his country before his family, just as he had said he must to his wife Licinia at the opening (and throughout) the play. Chénier has set up the scene so that Caius can be shown demonstrating precisely the patriotic virtue which Heuzet had exemplified in his Latin selections from history, in stories showing: 'Fathers renouncing the tenderest sentiments of Nature, to secure the public Liberty'.[31]

The most dramatic part of the Plutarch narrative (the pursuit of Caius and the return of his

[30] So, for example, Caius' tells his mother and wife about the death of Quintus in Act I, scene 2 and includes the motif of the insult from Plutarch.

[31] The first edition was: J. Heuzet, *Selectae e profanis scriptoribus historiae, quibus admista sunt varia honeste vivendi praecepta ex iisdem scriptoribus deprompta* (Paris 1717); but I quote here from the London edition of the same (London 1771) vi, for ease of reference. In fact, one of the stories he uses to demonstrate this point is none other than the death of Tiberius Gracchus, in which he suggests Scipio Nasica puts his fatherland first when he kills his own relation.



CAIUS GRACCHUS,

TRAGÉDIE EN TROIS ACTES,

Par Marie-Joseph Chénier, Député à la Convention Nationale;

Repréſentée pour la première fois à Paris, ſur le Théâtre de la République, le 9 Février 1792, l'an I de la République Françaiſe.

Des Lois, & non du ſang. *Acte II, Scène II.*

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1793.

Figure 3. Title page of Chénier's Caius Gracchus. Produced courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

head) is omitted. Instead, Caius offers himself in a noble sacrifice: his dying wish is that the people should be free. Notably the people stand around him protecting him from the group of senators, so clearly redeeming the people from the negative claims which Rollin had made about them (see above). Denying Caius flight enabled Chénier to showcase his self-sacrifice and ennobled his death through making it a conscious choice. Within moments of the death of Caius on stage, Opimius is put to death by the people in another significant twist on Plutarch's narrative. In Plutarch, Opimius lives to old age in dishonour and hated by the Roman people (39.18). The sense of retribution hinted at by this end is accelerated by Chénier and put into immediate effect through the death of Opimius. There was perhaps a political motivation in presenting a sense of closure on the bloodshed. According to his contemporary Daunou, Chénier advocated, through the mouthpiece of his character Caius: 'Laws and not blood!'; this slogan would appear prominently on the title page of the published play (fig. 3).[32] When Caius says, shortly before his death, that he wanted 'to stop the carnage' (p. 55), this too might suggest Chénier's own position. The final word of the play, after this bloodshed, is *liberté*, which would chime as both celebratory and elusory in the performance history of this play.

Chénier's development of Caius as a mouthpiece against bloodshed of the people owes much to Vertot's version of the story, which he had probably read at school and would later praise as a 'succinct and brilliant work'.[33] Vertot refers to Plutarch explicitly, but develops the narrative further including a prevalent concern with bloodshed.[34] In precisely the part of the narrative where

[32] See Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) I iii–iv.

[33] Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) II ch. 5, 167.

[34] Vertot, abbé de, *Histoire des révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la République romaine*, 7th edn (Paris 1786) II 340, 358, 373, 381. Vertot had first published in 1719; I refer to the 1786 edition for ease of reference. See

Rollin inserts his damning aside, Vertot comments that Caius weeps in front of the statue as though foreseeing with sorrow all the blood which the dispute would spill the next day.[35] Further emphasis on this motif is given as Caius sends the son of Fulvius to the senate making them swear to spare the blood of fellow citizens; Caius is warned of the shedding of blood; Opimius' implacable hatred is not assuaged even after 'so much bloodshed'; and finally 'after spilling so much blood' Opimius dares to have a temple built to Concordia.[36]

While the emphasis on bloodshed (and plea for its avoidance) is already found in Vertot (first published in 1719), the context of the play's production gives this motif a new political force, following as it did the massacre of the Champs-de-Mars in July 1791.[37] The play also became more controversial as Robespierre's influence increased and the Terror got underway. Although *Caius Gracchus* had been championed by the Convention in August 1793, it would be condemned in October of the same year for its dangerously moderate views.[38] The condemnation came from Antoine-Louis Albitte, who was a Montagnard holding office in the Legislative Assembly and National Convention. He had possibly first voiced objections to Chénier's *Timoleon* in a performance at the Théâtre de la rue Richelieu on 5 October.[39] The theatre, fearing closure, then seems to have replaced it with *Caius Gracchus* only to have further objections to this production from Albitte, who during the performance cried out in response to Caius' hemistich 'Des lois, non pas du sang': 'Cette maxime est le dernier retranchement du feuillantisme' ('This maxim is the final stronghold of the royalists').[40] Although those in the theatre had reacted positively to the lines in the play and drowned out Albitte's objections, the ultra-revolutionary position was clear: the play was attacked in anarchist papers and there is even anecdotal evidence for Robespierre himself walking out of a performance of *Caius Gracchus* at the utterance of this same hemistich.[41] The political climate had changed significantly since the play's première in 1792: it was now a world where Albitte's counter slogan: 'Du sang et non des lois' ('Blood and not laws!') was the order of the day.[42] Daunou, Chénier's contemporary who wrote the introduction to Chénier's posthumous works (published in 1824), sees this slogan as representative of the position of those in power at the time:[43]

> They did not forgive him [Chénier] for having borrowed their [Romans'] voice to demand laws and not blood, at the precise moment that blood was flowing in France onto the ruins

also n. 13, above for the first English translation (London 1720).

[35] 'Comme prévoyant avec douleur tout le sang que sa querelle seroit répandre le lendemain' Vertot (n. 34, above) 2, 409 (our translation).

[36] Vertot (n. 34, above) II 411, 413, and 415.

[37] D. Wiles, *Theatre and Citizenship* (Cambridge 2011) 164.

[38] For decree of Convention, see n. 16, above.

[39] G. E. Rodmell, *French Drama of the Revolutionary Years* (London 1990) 34 and Wiles, *Theatre* (n. 37, above) 168 offer differing accounts of censuring of the play. Wiles (following P. d'Estrée, *Le Théâtre sous la Terreur* [Paris 1913] 132–33) suggests that *Timoleon* was written *after* the censure of *Caius Gracchus*; *contre*, Rodmell, who dates Albitte's censure of *Caius Gracchus* after the production of *Timoleon*.

[40] For censure of the play see Daunou in Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) I iii–iv; Rodmell, *French Drama* (n. 39, above) 34; and Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 132–33; 392–94. *Feuillantisme*, the doctrine of the royalist club de Feuillants, had been linked with support for the aristocracy by Robespierre in his *Discours sur la guerre*, published the year before, where he makes the contemporary use of this term as a weapon of political slander clear. Albitte is also said to have accused Chénier of having always been a fake revolutionary; Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 136.

[41] Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 132–33.

[42] Albitte is credited with coming up with this slogan a few days after the October performance in which he denounced the play: Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 132–33.

[43] See Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) I iii. Our own translation.

of all social institutions. The tyrants responded: Blood and not laws, banned the play, and decided to ban the poet.

Chénier, who had championed freedom of expression with his inflammatory pamphlet denouncing the 'inquisitors of thoughts' back in 1789, and who had been pivotal in legislating for the freedom of the theatre in January 1791 (which resulted in the abolition of censorship), was now himself the subject of denunciation and censure.[44] The precise details of the ban are not known, though part of Chénier's fall from grace was expressed in his dismissal from the Committee for Public Instruction in the autumn of 1793.[45] Daunou, despite noting the ban, begins this paragraph explaining that the play was first produced in 1792 and was still being performed in 1794.[46] It may be that he is referring to performances of the play in the provinces in 1794: there is evidence for performances in both Nantes and Angers.[47] It seems, however, that these productions were subjected to a different form of censorship. They appear to have been carefully managed to allow the play to be a celebration of Jean-Paul Marat, the radical supporter of the *sans culottes*, who had been murdered by the Girondist sympathizer Charlotte Corday in July 1793. In a letter to the Convention, Jean-Baptiste Carrier describes the performance in Nantes in November 1794, as teaching the people a great lesson.[48] The nature of this lesson is made clear by the way in which he glosses the play as 'Caius Gracchus, le Marat romain' and claims that during the interval there were cries of 'Vive la Montagne!'[49] Clearly the play could only be allowed onto the stage if Caius could be understood as a hero belonging to the dominant ultra-revolutionaries.

This appropriation of the meaning of the play also provides the explanation for how, after its censure in 1793, the play could be included in the approved repertoire of the revolutionary committee of Angers in 1794.[50] The description of this repertoire as being 'marked with the most exalted republicanism' points to the understanding of this play in Montagnard terms.[51] Ironically it may have even been the censured performance of the play in October 1793 which suggested this radical reinterpretation. Following Albitte's heckling and the completion of the performance of *Caius Gracchus*, there was a recitation of Dorat-Cubières' poem lamenting the death of Marat.[52] It may well have been the juxtaposition in performance of these two men celebrated for giving up their lives for liberty which invited the reinterpretation of the play. While previously *Caius Gracchus* had enjoyed its success precisely because it 'performed the difficult feat of being approved by both sides of the political divide',[53] after 1793 its censorship meant withdrawal from performance in Paris and its future acceptance for performance only on the narrow radicalized interpretation of its protagonist. This appropriation of the play for radical purposes could be understood as a worse form of censorship (than a complete ban) for a moderate committed to the freedom of the press.

[44] M.-J. Chénier, *Dénonciation des inquisiteurs de la pensée* (Paris 1789); on which see R. Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in 18th-century France* (Stanford 2012) 95–96. On theatre legislation see Rodmell, *French Drama* (n. 39, above) 18–19 and 22 (abolition of office of censor).

[45] Wiles, *Theatre* (n. 37, above) 168.

[46] Chénier, *Oeuvres posthumes* (n. 14, above) I iii.

[47] Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 107–08.

[48] Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 107.

[49] Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 107.

[50] The play was named along with William Tell, Brutus, and Spartacus; Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 108.

[51] 'Empreint du republicanism le plus exalté'; Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 108.

[52] Estrée, *Le Théâtre* (n. 39, above) 392. Estrée describes this poem as the '*Mort de Marat*' ; I assume he is referring to Cubières, *Les deux martyrs de la liberté, ou Portraits de Marat et de Lepelletier* (Paris 1793).

[53] Quotation from Rodmell, *French Drama* (n. 39, above) 25. On the ambiguity of drama, see Wiles, *Theatre* (n. 37, above) 164.

Plutarch's sympathy in his treatment of the Gracchi, echoed by Chénier, combined with his agenda of offering exemplary models, emphasized in Dacier's translation,[54] created heroes of explosive political potential. In the hands of the wrong person this tale could become dangerous. Ironically, as well as the outright censorship which the play suffered at the hands of Robespierre, Chénier would also have to see that same sympathy at the heart of his play censored through its appropriation by the political group who had put his brother, the renowned poet André Chénier, to death in July 1794. In light of Chénier's own survival through the Terror, *Caius Gracchus*, despite its fine intentions as a play about a brother following another brother to his death, would prove to live as a further rebuke to this champion of liberty.[55]

Chénier's play became internationally famous, and was translated into other European languages, including Dutch, but never into English. It inspired the Italian author Vincenzo Monti, in his Girondist phase, to compose a similar play entitled *Caio Gracco* (1800). There was a version of Monti's play in English circulating by the late 1820s, and possibly earlier; it was published anonymously in just fifty copies, of which one is in the Bodleian Library, for private distribution, in 1830. Monti was one of the leaders of the minor revival of political literature in Italian produced by the French Revolution.[56] After a *Prometeo* (1797) urging liberty for Italy (which influenced Shelley), in 1800 Monti finished *Caius Gracchus*, which has been called 'the tragedy of the Italian Girondists of the French Revolution […] The heroes of this tragedy live an artificial life, and especially Caius Gracchus — that ideal Girondist — who proposed to reform the world by the moral influence of just laws rather than by the shedding of blood'.[57] In a step which would later be imitated by Knowles, Monti adds Shakespearean colour, from plays which themselves drew on Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, to Chénier's dramatic concept, thus complicating the status of his text as a mediated reception of Plutarch: when Lavinia protests against her husband going to meet his enemies unarmed, she recalls Portia's appeal to Brutus in *Julius Caesar* Act II scene 1; like Antony speaking over the corpse of Caesar in Act III scene 2, Monti's Opimio delivers an oration over the corpse of Emilian in order to rouse the wrath of the people against Gracchus and Fulvius. Monti even uses a translation of part of Act III scene 2 of *Henry VI*!

As in France and Italy, the Gracchi were identified as exemplary heroes earlier in Ireland than in Britain (Ireland, although ruled from Britain, was not formally united with England, Scotland, and Wales until 1800). Anglo-Irish writers, as well as Irish authors writing in English, had long used ancient Greek authors to express discontent with the situation in their country; a mysterious Irish version of Aristophanes' *Plutus* dating from the 1850s, discussed by Wyles in another volume, is a case in point.[58] But the Gracchi seemed particularly relevant in Ireland. Since the ancestors of many Catholics had been dispossessed of their land with the creation of the seventeenth-century plantations, the Irish peasantry identified intuitively with the cause of the ancient Roman poor advocated by the Gracchi. By 1773, a caustic critic of Lord Townshend's administration had signed himself *Caius Gracchus*.[59] In 1781, Mark Akenside enthusiastically adopted directly from

[54] Dacier quotes Livy's preface in his notes (Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity* [n. 18, above] 29) and throughout makes clear Dacier's view that the purpose of this work (and of his translation) is the improvement of manners; see, for example, his comments at the beginning of the life of Paul Emile: Dacier, *Les Vies* (n. 21, above) II 559–60.

[55] Wyles would like to record her thanks to Laurel Fulkerson for pointing this out to her and for her advice on this paper.

[56] E. Grillo, *Studies in Modern Italian Literature* (Glasgow 1930) 173–75.

[57] Grillo, *Studies* (n. 56, above) 200.

[58] R. Wyles, 'Publication as intervention: Aristophanes in 1659', in *Aristophanes*, eds Hall and Wrigley (n. 1, above) 94–105.

[59] The letter signed 'Caius Gracchus', appears among several other pseudonyms, in Anon., *Baratariana. A select collection of fugitive political pieces, published during the administration of Lord Townshend in Ireland*, 2nd corrected edn (Dublin 1773) 155.

France the radical Gracchi as opponents of oppression in Ireland.[60]

The impact of the French Revolution in Ireland was very different from its impact in England. The Irish peasants, so brutally oppressed by English or Anglophile landowners, identified with the French revolutionaries. They took hope when the new French government in 1791 said that it would offer military help to any movement attempting to depose their own monarch, and in February 1793 declared war on Britain and Ireland. It was in this context that our second playwright, the Irishman James Sheridan Knowles, always known to his friends as 'Paddy', found himself at the age of nine in the position of political exile.[61] The playwright's father ran a small Dublin school. A radical Protestant, and cousin of the dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Knowles Senior advocated Catholic Emancipation. After publicly supporting a liberal newspaper whose editor was imprisoned for criticizing the government, he had to leave Ireland for London, with no money and his small son, in a hurry.

William Hazlitt, who was himself of Irish Protestant descent, befriended them. Hazlitt was an important conduit through which French Enlightenment and continental revolutionary thought and authors were disseminated on this side of the Channel, and his influence on the little Knowles was profound.[62] Knowles seems at this time to have read a great deal of classical literature in English as well as works in modern languages, as is demonstrated by his intimate knowledge of famous eighteenth-century translations of the tragedians and Roman rhetoricians, in the lectures he delivered in mid-life to self-improvement and learned societies in provincial cities including Belfast, Liverpool, and Barnsley.[63] But in the 1790s, the future playwright and his radical father watched from England as in Ireland, the United Irishmen were founded, forward-looking Catholics and Protestants alike, with the intention of founding a democratic republic on French lines. When the British began arresting and murdering the members of this organization, the result was the 1798 rebellion which was brutally put down at the Battle of Vinegar Hill. The French sent reinforcements who landed at Mayo on the western coast, but the joint Franco-Irish rebel army was again defeated.

When he grew up, Knowles worked as an actor centred in Bath and Dublin until, after the birth of his first child, he opted for the safer income of a teacher. He had no university-level education himself, but was very widely read, and was hired to teach English Literature at Belfast Academical Institution, where he began to write stage plays. He moved soon afterwards to teach in Glasgow instead; until a sudden conversion to an extreme version of Protestant Christianity in the 1840s, he divided his extra-curricular energies between theatre and radical politics. For a time he co-edited, with William Spencer Northhouse, the newspaper *Glasgow Free Press*, which campaigned for Catholic emancipation, abolition, parliamentary reform, municipal reform, abolition of capital punishment except in cases of murder, repeal of the Tests and Corporations Act, and free trade. A huge success, it briefly became the most popular paper in western Scotland when it agitated for higher wages to be paid to the handloom weavers.[64]

Knowles (fig. 4) became an exceptionally popular dramatist, his *Virginius* (1820), *William*

[60] 'An Epistle to Curio', lines 210–18, in M. Akenside, *The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside* (Edinburgh 1781) 2, 125.

[61] According to his son, Richard Brinsley Knowles (R. B. Knowles, *The Life of James Sheridan Knowles* [London 1872] 1) Knowles' ancestry could be traced no further back than his grandfather, one John Knowles of Dublin, but his father (he says) 'cared very little for matters of this kind; and indeed he was one of the few radicals I have met who have not at heart a profound veneration for good birth'.

[62] Knowles, *Life* (n. 61, above) 6–25. Hazlitt certainly discussed the Gracchi, and regarded interest in them as emblematic of a certain kind of literary radicalism (*The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A. R. Waller and A. Glover, 1902-06, XVI: 220–21).

[63] J. S. Knowles, *Lectures on Dramatic Literature (delivered Belfast in 1830 and Liverpool in 1848)* (London 1873); and *Lectures on Oratory, Gesture and Poetry* (London 1873) esp. 9–11.

[64] Knowles, *Life* (n. 61, above) 76–78.

Figure 4. Photogravure of a performance of Virginius by James Sheridan Knowles (Hall's private collection) in the 1860s.

Tell (1825), and *The Hunchback* (1832) chiming perfectly in tune with the reformist spirit of the late Georgian period and remaining for years staples of the early and mid-Victorian middlebrow stage repertoire. A typical critic wrote in 1847 that Mr Knowles is 'a writer full of individuality as of geniality, who has been popular without coarse conception, and received as a poet without making any extraordinary pretensions. The first and last cause of his well-deserved popularity as a dramatist, is the heartiness of his writings […] The *heart* which Mr Knowles puts into his work lays hold of the hearts of his public; and this is his secret. In fine, counting Burns at the head of the Uneducated Poets […] we think that Mr Sheridan Knowles will keep his place in the annals of the British Theatre as King of Uneducated Dramatists.'[65]

The allegedly 'uneducated' Knowles, the Robert Burns of the stage, wrote *Caius Gracchus* for the Belfast Theatre and it was first performed there on 13 February 1815. According to a review in *The Belfast News-Letter*, it 'was throughout received with the rapturous plaudits of a crowded house'.[66] This is scarcely surprising; not only did it speak directly to the plight of the Irish peasantry, but it encouraged more British-identified members of the Belfast audience to draw connections between poverty in ancient Rome and modern Britain after the 1813 Corn Laws had kept the price of bread impossibly high, and at the end of the Napoleonic Wars there had been a drastic economic slump and widespread famine afflicting the north of both England and Ireland in 1814.

When Knowles' play opens, Caius has returned to Rome and tells the audience how stirred he is by the sufferings of the poor: 'they are bare and hungry, houseless and friendless, and my heart bleeds for them'.[67] The second scene is a noisy enactment of the trial of Spurius Vetteius, a friend of Caius' dead brother Tiberius and supporter of the people, for sedition. There are two factions on stage, senators and citizens, and class-based insults are traded; afterwards, Flaminius

[65] H. Chorley, 'George Lovell', *The Athenaeum* 1009 (27 February 1847) 223–24.

[66] Quoted in Knowles, *Life* (n. 61, above) 64–65.

[67] J. S. Knowles, *Caius Gracchus* (Glasgow 1823) 4.

and Fannus plot to bring discredit to Caius in the senate. The overall politics of the piece are most clearly expressed in the third scene of Act ii, where the plebeians Titus and Marcus, who support Caius, have an altercation with two servants of men of the senatorial class in the Campus Martius. There is mass civic tumult, the senators' men raise their weapons, and the plebeian Titus delivers a stirring speech in the prose style which Knowles is imitating from some of Shakespeare's lower-class characters,

> Down with your staff, master, for I have another that may ruffle the gloss of your cloak for you. What! has anything surprised you? Do you wonder that the order that wins your battles in the field, should refuse your blows in the city? You despise us when you have no need of us; but if an ounce of power or peculation is to be gained through our means, oh! then you put on your sweet looks, and, bowing to the very belts of our greasy jackets, you exclaim, 'Fair gentlemen! — kind fellow-citizens! — loving comrades! — sweet, worthy, gentle Romans! — grant us your voices!' Or, if the enemy is to be opposed, oh! *then* we are 'men of mettle!' — (poor starved devils!) — 'the defenders of our country!' — (that is, your cattle as you call us) — and so indeed we are. We bear your patricians on our backs to victory; we carry them proudly through the ranks of the barbarians! They come off safe — we get the knocks, the pricks, and the scratches. They obtain crowns and triumphs, — we cannot obtain — a dinner! They get their actions recorded — we get ours forgotten! They receive new names and titles — we return to our old ones with which you honour us —'the rabble! — the herd! — the cattle! — the vermin! — the scum of Rome!'[68]

Quintus, one of the senator's attendants, responds simply, 'These greasy citizens are uttering treason against our masters, the noble patricians'.

Caius is arraigned by the senators on trumped-up charges, but is acquitted and sticks to his guns and puts his name forward as tribune:

> Ye men of Rome, there is no favour
> For justice! — Grudgingly her dues are granted!
> Your great men boast no more the love of country!
> They count their talents — measure their domains —
> Number their slaves — make lists of knights and clients —
> Enlarge their palaces — dress forth their banquets,
> Awake their lyres and timbrels, and with their floods
> Of ripe Falernian, drown the little left
> Of Roman virtue![69]

The evil aristocrats in Act iii scene 1 plot to use Drusus in order to attack Caius. Drusus, who has a naïve belief in the patricians' good motives, agrees to propose something so attractive to the people that he wins their favour, thus lessening Caius' grip on them. In the next scene, set in the forum, Caius pleads with the people not to treat him like a king, but Drusus argues that Caius is not going far enough. There ensues a competition in benefits to be offered to the people. Drusus says he is acting on the instructions of the senate, but Caius caustically responds, like a proto-Chartist, that if the members of the senate love the people so much then they won't mind if they are all given the vote.

Caius can't persuade Drusus that he is being duped by the senate. But Caius' colleagues can't persuade *him* that he must court the people to retain his influence with them. He loses the

[68] Knowles, *Gracchus* (n. 67, above) 19.

[69] The tone of this passage echoes the following passage in Monti's Italian play (in its English translation (V. Monti, *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy* [London 1830] 3): 'midst the fumes of wine / And banquets, revel still the loose patricians'.

tribuneship, Opimius is elected consul and announces that he is about to repeal all Caius' reformist laws. The senate declares a state of emergency and identifies Caius as the enemy of the state. There is going to be a showdown. There are emotive scenes between Caius and Cornelia and Caius and his wife Licinia, clutching his little son. Both women try to prevent him from going out in public. They fail.

The final scene is set in the temple of Diana. The women are praying while the class war rages in the streets. They learn that many of Caius' plebeian supporters desert him. His aristocratic allies are killed by the consul's forces, leaving him isolated and vulnerable. He arrives and commits suicide, but only after saying of the plebs:

> May they remain the abject things they are,
> Begging their daily pittance from the hands
> Of tyrant lords that spurn them! May they crawl
> Ever in bondage and in misery,
> And never know the blessèd rights of freemen!
> Here will I perish![70]

The implication is that the only real barrier to an egalitarian republic is the inability of the common people to rise manfully to the challenge. Knowles here shows himself sensitive to the nervousness felt even in radical Irish circles towards the bloodbath in which the French Revolution had culminated during the Terror. Knowles was certainly acquainted with the tragedies of Chénier and Monti. But his play is more pessimistic about the possibility of democratic and redistributive reforms, even if it is even more convinced of their desirability.

In London, however, the play that made Knowles' name was his much better written *Virginius*, which continued to be revived for decades, as this photogravure of a performance around 1865 illustrates (fig. 5). But the young actor who created the stirring role for its première, on 17 May 1820 at Covent Garden, was William Charles Macready. This was also a history play, set in an earlier phase of Republican Rome, and based on the story of Virginius as related in Livy Book 3, chapter 44. The tale had previously been dramatized as the Jacobean *Appius and Virginia* by John Webster and Thomas Heywood. Knowles' *Virginius* certainly had a political message, in that Appius Claudius abuses his political power on account of his lust for Virginia. But a play that rages against tyrants demanding sex with their inferiors is not political dynamite of the same order as a play that rages against poverty and hunger. Even this far less politically explosive play was first censored, however, under the terms of the 1737 Licensing Act, the history of which, since it is closely connected with the staging of ancient Greek and Roman material, here requires some further explanation.

Under the Act, passed on 24 June 1737, the Lord Chamberlain was granted the power to refuse a licence to any play acted 'for hire, gain, or reward' anywhere in Great Britain 'as often as he shall think fit'. The Act provided the basis for the law surrounding theatrical censorship that survived, substantially unchanged, until the 1968 Theatre Act when the British stage was finally freed from the clutches of the censor.[71] All theatres were 'under the immediate Directions of a Court Officer'. The main thrust of the legislation was political, having been drawn up by Walpole in order to curb political attacks on him in the theatre. Tension between the first Prime Minister and the theatres had mounted with such thinly veiled defences of the constitutional principles of the Glorious Revolution against their perceived betrayal as the Irish author Samuel Madden's oppositional (and

[70] Knowles, *Gracchus* (n. 67, above) 57.

[71] For the general history of stage censorship in Britain, see F. Fowell and F. Palmer, *Censorship in England* (London 1913); R. Findlater, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London 1967); J. Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London 1990). On the 1737 Act, see R. W. Vince, *Neoclassical Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook* (New York 1988) 14–15, 25–26.

Figure 5. Stipple engraving of William Charles Macready as Caius in Cauis Gracchus by James Sheridan Knowles. In the collection in the library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaigne (high-resolution copy, reproduced with the Library's permission).

partly Plutarch-derived) *Themistocles, the Lover of his Country* (1729), and plays on episodes from the Roman Republic such as William Bond's *The Tuscan Treaty; or, Tarquin's Overthrow* (Covent Garden 1733) and William Duncombe's *Junius Brutus* (Drury Lane 1734). Such was the climate of hostility to the king and Walpole amongst most prominent literary men that even John Gay's *Achilles* (Covent Garden 1733), a truly lighthearted burlesque of a classical myth, was read politically.[72]

Other attacks had been made in comedy, where the ancient author most implicated was neither a tragedian nor ancient historiographers, but Aristophanes. Chief amongst the theatrical critics of the increasingly dictatorial Walpole was Henry Fielding, whose satires were playing to packed houses at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket: *The Author's Farce* (based on Aristophanes' *Frogs*), which premiered in 1730, had adroitly exposed the problems facing dramatists in the face of Walpole's increasing scrutiny of the stage;[73] they included *Historical Register for the Year 1736* in March 1737, and *Eurydice Hiss'd* (whose katabatic theme drew on Aristophanes' *Frogs*) in April. The immediate effect was to reduce to two the number of London theatres and thus to cut the number of new plays acted each season. The survivors were the old patented houses Covent Garden and Drury Lane, plus the King's Opera House, which did not perform new stage plays. Fielding had picked up considerable respect for ancient Greek literature, and in 1742 he published the translation of *Wealth* on which he had collaborated with William Young. In the preface Fielding developed his ideas about the possibility of a political comedy. Since Walpole could now refuse a

[72] J. Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England* (Oxford 1963) 111; Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy* (n. 1, above) 105.

[73] E. Hall, 'The English-speaking Aristophanes', in *Aristophanes in Performance*, eds E. Hall and A. Wrigley (Oxford 2007) 66–92 (72–74).

licence to any but the most anodyne of comedies, the legislation put Fielding out of business and drove him into attacking Walpole by other means.

In hindsight, it seems amazing that James Thomson's anti-Walpole *Agamemnon* (1738) managed to escape any cutting except for six lines of the prologue actually written by another opposition playwright, Thomson's Scottish friend David Mallet, which contained a contentious reference to the Licensing Act. Walpole simply may not have understood how Thomson's play directed its allegorical polemic against him. The Thomson play which did indeed find itself banned from the stage was one which drew heavily on Euripides, even though this is not immediately obvious because its setting is the Crusades and it also makes use of a medieval tale. *Edward and Eleonora* (proscribed 1739) uses details and (very often) verbatim translations from Euripides' play concerning Alcestis' altruistic act to save her own husband's life. The Lord Chamberlain's office had no problem with decoding this particular political allegory. Thomson's *Edward and Eleonora* was actually in rehearsal at Covent Garden, after a transcript had been duly sent to the Stage Licenser, when just two days before the play was due to open, it was forbidden; this was only a fortnight after Henry Brooke's *Gustavus Vasa: The Deliverer of his Country*, a rousing Whig polemic set in sixteenth-century Sweden, was proscribed. The Licenser was offended by several passages in *Edward and Eleonora* criticizing the corruption of court officers. The next play using an ancient Greek source to be refused a licence was James Shirley's Electra (1762): it savagely denounced the then Prime Minister, John Stuart, third Earl of Bute, and his influence over the Royal Family, by equating him with Aegisthus.[74]

It is against this background of censorship, even of stories derived from the medieval and classical past, that we need to understand why Knowles' *Virginius* was only given permission for performance 'after the Lord Chamberlain, at the express command of the newly crowned George IV, had cut out some of the lines on tyranny'.[75] Censorship of the stage had always been erratic and inconsistent, and depended in large measure on the political atmosphere at the time and the temperament of the Prime Minister, Lord Chamberlain, and their officers. But George IV was extremely unpopular, and his arrival on the throne heralded increasingly harsh censorship. At the time of the première of *Virginius*, and the London production of *Caius Gracchus* three years later, the Lord Chamberlain was the Duke of Montrose, a Scottish Tory 'determinedly antagonistic to plays on revolutionary themes'.[76] But the man who actually wielded the blue pencil from 1778 and until the end of December 1823 in the post of Examiner of Plays was a dour Methodist by the name of John Larpent.[77] Having served in the Foreign Office and in George III's household as a Gentleman Usher and a Groom, Larpent notoriously delegated some of the play-reading to his much younger wife, Anna Margaretta, so we will never know who actually made the decisions on the texts of Knowles.

Despite the enforced cuts to *Virginius*, the enthusiasm of its public reception inspired Knowles to return to his previous play *Caius Gracchus*. George IV, however, was making himself steadily more unpopular, and was perceived as corrupt, autocratic, and dissolute. The political tension at the time meant that when in November 1823 *Caius Gracchus* was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain, who then operated from St James' Palace, it inevitably ran into trouble. Via Larpent, who was in the very last weeks of office before retirement, the Lord Chamberlain let it be known that he was 'shocked at its liberal sentiments'.[78] In a drastically censored version, when permission was

[74] Full detail of these eighteenth-century licensing fracas can be found in Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy* (n. 1, above) chs 4 and 6.

[75] W. Archer, *William Charles Macready* (London 1890) 53. See further L. W. Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama, 1737–1824* (San Marino, CA and Folkestone 1976) 109–10.

[76] J. R. Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* (Cambridge 1980) 18.

[77] On whom see Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain* (n. 71, above) 46.

[78] Knowles, *Life* (n. 61, above) 69–70.

'at length obtained',[79] *Caius Gracchus* was produced at Drury Lane, starring Macready, on 18 November 1823 for seven nights.

The physical manuscript submitted to the Lord Chamberlain has survived in the Larpent Collection of plays (now held in the Huntingdon Library, San Marino, California).[80] So does a printed version of the original play, as performed in Belfast, which was published in 1823 in Glasgow, and to which Knowles restored many lines which had been cut for the Drury Lane production. This allows us a precious opportunity to study closely the processes by which a performance text deemed acceptable was painfully achieved. Knowles (or more probably the Drury Lane manager, Alfred Bunn) had already chopped out some of the most incendiary material before it was even offered to the Lord Chamberlain. Almost all of Titus' prose speech (quoted above, pp. 000) has been prudently omitted, so that it reads simply, 'Down with your staff, master, for I have another that may ruffle the gloss of your cloak for you!' From Opimius' speech (quoted above, pp. 000), the Drury Lane rehearsal script has omitted the provocative line saying that the great men of Rome 'Number their slaves — make lists of knights and clients'. But this was not enough for the censor, who also struck out the line saying that these men 'Enlarge their palaces — dress forth their banquets.' The most drastic example of censorship, however, comes from a speech delivered by Caius Gracchus himself, in Act III scene 1 claiming that Opimius does not succeed by 'flattering' the Roman populace but by offering them bribes which bring the very worst out in their characters. In the Belfast production, reflected in the printed version, Caius said,

> Opimius then is not the people's flatterer.
> He'd make the people look below themselves.
> How would he rate them? As we rate our herds.
> How would he use them? As we use our herds.
> O may the people ever have such flatterers
> As guard them from the kindness of such friends![81]

The text submitted to the Lord Chamberlain wisely took out the two middle lines suggesting that Opimius respects the people no more than herds of cattle. But this did not go far enough for Larpent, who took his blue pencil to the last two lines as well.

Despite all the cuts, Macready still managed to make Caius' tragedy seem politically mutinous enough to persuade his ambitious rival actor, Edmund Kean, not to appear on a stage with him for several years subsequently. Macready endured poverty and humiliation as a child and his response was to become an ardent republican. His father, a prominent lessee of provincial theatres who originally came from Ireland, was imprisoned for debt, blighting the ambitions of his Rugby-educated middle-class son, who knew and loved his Greek and Roman classics. He was forced to leave school at the age of only fifteen and try to rescue his father's failing theatre in Manchester. Then unable to attend Oxford University, as he had planned, the youth decided to stay on stage himself. But he loathed the monarchy with an unusual intensity and banned the phrase 'lower classes', insisting that they be called 'poorer classes'.[82] He remained angry and socially insecure all his life, indeed once terribly insulting the shabby Irish playwright who helped make him famous but to whom he clearly felt superior in class terms. After the première of *Virgnius,* Macready was the only untitled guest dining at an aristocrat's house. Knowles arrived later to present a copy of the play, but Macready was embarrassed by his presence and hissed at him that he should not have

[79] Archer, *Macready* (n. 75, above) 69.

[80] Our thanks go to Dr Henry Stead for help on this issue.

[81] Knowles, *Gracchus* (n. 67, above) 27.

[82] W. Marston, *Our Recent Actors*, 2 vols (London 1888) I 65.

come. Only later did he come to his senses and apologize.[83]

In 1823 Macready was still only thirty years old, and had not yet become the most famous actor–manager in Britain, known always to select roles which allowed him to impersonate 'the defender of the Hearth, Home, and the People against the brutality of tyrants', and to pour out 'the zeal and heat of his own political convictions'.[84] These included not only James Knowles' classical heroes but Thomas Talfourd's stirring republican adaptation of Euripides' *Ion* (1836).[85] Watching Macready playing a Roman hero who dies attempting to defend the rights of the poor must have been quite an experience (fig. 6). Conservative stage critics were already denouncing him in the early 1820s for habitually appearing in 'democratic, ranting, trashy plays'.[86]

Caius Gracchus was a commercial failure. Macready blamed what he saw as the execrable acting of Margaret Bunn, the wife of the Drury Lane manager, as Cornelia. But even he acknowledged that the contemporary taste for more emotionally appealing stage entertainment was not hospitable to the polemical tone and emotional gravity of *Caius Gracchus*: 'it was not in the nature of things that such a play should become really popular'.[87] It was not, to our knowledge, publicly revived. But because it had been performed by Macready, and because Knowles remained a prominent and indeed much-respected writer for the rest of his life, it continued to be read and almost certainly performed in private theatricals.[88] *Virginius* continued to be a smash hit and a key play in Macready's repertoire for another thirty years,[89] inevitably drawing readers to Knowles' other Roman history play, so famous that sculptures to remind the viewer of his Romans are carved conspicuously onto his tomb building in the Glasgow Necropolis (fig. 6).

The effect of Knowles' play on the afterlife of Plutarch's Gracchi, moreover, remained conspicuous in the case of Ireland, 'Gracchus' becoming thereafter almost a code-word for the cause of Irish Republicanism. Indeed, 'Gracchus' was the chosen pseudonym of John O'Callaghan, the Irish activist and poet, who in *The Exterminator's Song* (1842) celebrated in the persona of 'Gracchus', in a dialogue poem, the call for total rent strikes by the peasants made by the agitator William Conner:

'Tis I am the poor man's scourge,
And where is the scourge like me?
My land from all Papists I purge,
Who think that their votes should be free —
Who think that their votes should be free!
From huts only fitted for brutes,
My agent the last penny wrings;
And my serfs live on water and roots,
While I feast on the best of good things!
For I am the poor man's scourge!
For I am the poor man's scourge!

[83] J. C. Trewin, *Mr Macready: A Nineteenth-Century Tragedian and his Theatre* (London 1955) 62.

[84] *Bulwer and Macready*, ed. C. H. Shattock (Urbana, IL 1958) 5.

[85] See E. Hall, 'Talfourd's ancient Greeks in the theatre of reform', *IJCT* 3 (1997) 283–307; revised version (2005) in Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy* (n. 1, above) ch. 11.

[86] Words from a review of Macready's performance of *Virginius* in *John Bull* of 13 October 1823, quoted by Archer, *Macready* (n. 75, above) 68.

[87] Quoted by Archer, *Macready* (n. 75, above) 69.

[88] See the publisher's remarks in the 'Advertisement' to the published version of Knowles' complete plays (J. S. Knowles, *Dramatic Works* [London and New York 1856]): they have been induced 'to issue the present elegant and extremely cheap edition' because the plays have met with 'very marked favour […] both as acting and as closet plays […] from the general public'.

[89] Archer, *Macready* (n. 75, above) 204.

Figure 6. J. S. Knowles' tomb, decorated with figures from his famous plays, in Glasgow Necropolis (photo by Perry Holmes).

[*Caius Gracchus* responds:]

Yes, you are the poor man's scourge!
But of such the whole island we'll purge![90]

It took historical events as drastic as the French Revolution, the massacre at Peterloo, and famines in Britain and Ireland to make the Gracchi speak sympathetically from public stages to wide cross-class audiences. Yet, paradoxically, once they had found their place in the dynamic medium of live theatre, they found themselves being controlled again. They were violently contested between different factions and policed through censorship by the ultra-Left in France. But Caius Gracchus and his plebeian supporters also had their rhetorical wings stripped almost bare by the hard Right in Britain, owing to the ideological power of the ultra-conservative Lord Chamberlain's office in the democratic agitation of the 1820s. Plutarch's vision of the brothers who stood up for the People could just not stop being political dynamite…

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[90] Printed in *Ballads and Songs by the Writers of 'The Nation'*, ed. C. G. Duffy (Dublin 1845) 184–85.