

Real Roman Men and the Greeks Who Hate Them: Manhood, Slavery and Plutarch's

Cato Maior

It is, perhaps, not surprising that Cato the Elder as an outsider felt the need to embody an overt and excessive *Romanitas*, especially in terms of how he exercised personal self-control (*disciplina*) as a feature of his masculinity. Yet, this representation of *disciplina* is not a universal object of praise. I examine resistance to notions of Roman *disciplina* (ἐγκρατεία, σωφροσύνη) as it appears in Plutarch's *Cato Maior*, and the way that Plutarch interrupts his narrative to critique Cato, specifically in terms of his adherence to a Roman masculinity that Plutarch finds not only unseemly, but more particularly immoral.

Ancient sources—both in his own writings and those of historians—represent Cato as an exemplar of the Roman male: he is the farmer par excellence, a stalwart soldier, an incorruptible politician and a plain-speaking statesman. We can define these arenas with a number of quintessential Roman attributes (e.g., *virtus*, *frugalitas*), but one could argue that Cato's performance of Roman masculinity rests principally on his personal self-control (*disciplina*), enabling his commanding performance in all these various male-coded pursuits. Indeed, one might argue that his form of ultra-masculinity becomes the new normal, in essence recalibrating the ideal (if not the actual) Roman to a hyper-masculine performance of personal self-control. Yet, in one of the most detailed and lengthiest accounts of Cato's life, Plutarch's *Cato Maior*, we find an explicit critique of this posture.

Plutarch clearly states the moral project of the *Parallel Lives*: the biographies ought to provide exempla of both virtue and vice, some *Lives* in their entirety, others only in discrete episodes (Duff 1999: 52). While there are *Lives* that show positive and negative qualities of both

Greeks and Romans, Philip Stadter has argued that Plutarch positions himself as a critic of Roman power. Yet, it is curious that in the *Cato Maior* Plutarch's severest disapproval targets Cato's personal rather than political behavior, particularly as in two episodes involving his slaves.

I look at these two key moments in the *Cato Maior*, one where Cato exhibits complete self-control and one where he lacks it: Plutarch's lengthy rebuke of Cato's recommendation that a farmer sell his slaves when they reach old age and are no longer productive (4-5), and his critique of Cato's sexual habits in old age (24 and *syn.* 6). In the first episode we witness an individual who is able to exercise self-control to an unseemly degree, such that he is able to view humans who have worked his land as no different from his farm animals. Plutarch interrupts the action of the narrative to apostrophize on the barbarity of this treatment, specifically by examining it in light of Greek treatment of animals (5). In the second example Cato, widowed but living with his son and daughter-in-law, is caught sleeping with a slave girl (παιδίσκη, 24), who flaunted her relationship with the master in front of his son (παρασοβῆσαι παρὰ τὸ δωμάτιον δόξαντος, 24). Rather than cause discomfort in his home, Cato chose to remarry, but selected for his bride the daughter of a former undersecretary. Plutarch condemns this, finding Cato inferior in *sophrosyne* compared to Aristides, because he contracted a marriage contrary to his status and time of life (παρὰ ἀξίαν ἅμα καὶ παρ' ὄραν, *syn.* 6).

Of particular interest is the framing Greek resistance to a Roman model of masculinity through the bodies of the enslaved. This is not to say that Plutarch was an abolitionist; nevertheless, Plutarch's choice of critique—both of which take aim at Cato's explicitly Roman masculine behavior—shows the possibility of judging imperialism by analyzing the most extreme results of Roman values. Moreover, in both cases the bodies of slaves are the impetus

for the critique, in the first case because Cato fails to recognize their humanity; in the second because he prefers the humiliation of an inferior marriage to the embarrassment of a liaison with a slave.

Plutarch's critique offers three distinct revelations. First, Plutarch shows how deliberately Cato's Roman-encoded masculinity was a performance (which is not to deny it was perhaps a performance Cato believed in). Second, Plutarch reminds us that the hardness won by *disciplina* was not valued by everyone, everywhere at all times. Finally, as in our own time, stances against toxic masculinity are not only rooted in science or morality, but may also reveal a cultural outlook, and here specifically as a way to mark a Greek identity. Plutarch's identification of Cato's misuse or misunderstanding of virtue opens a safe(r) space to interrogate Roman imperialism and rewrites the value (or poverty) of Roman self-control.

Bibliography

Duff, Timothy E. 1999. *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice*. Oxford.

Stadter, Philip. 2015. *Plutarch and his Roman Readers*. Oxford.