

Cicero's *Pro Murena* and Cato the Younger's Masculinity

While it is well established that Cicero describes Cato's rigid stoicism as a rhetorical strategy in an attempt to make Cato seem as though he was prosecuting Murena out of his stoic inflexibility which would have made Cato an improper judge of the case (Stem 2006). Through sampling some of the ways that Cicero describes Cato's stoicism it can additionally be shown that that Cicero also calls Cato's manhood into question. Cicero explains how Cato's misguided adaptation of Zeno's stoic teachings were improper for a prosecutor because they would not allow him to judge the case fairly.

According to Cicero Cato believed that: *Sapientem gratia numquam moveri, numquam cuiusquam delicto ignoscere; neminem misericordem esse nisi stultum et levem* (The wise (man) is never moved by thankfulness, the wise (man) is never ignorant of someone's offense; no one is merciful unless a fool or a trifler *Pro Murena* 61). In a study on Roman masculinity in the Republic, Myles McDonnell points out that elite men were supposed to be self-controlled, merciful, and reasonable. Cicero describes Cato's belief this way because it posits him in a way (at least rhetorically) against Roman male ideals. By placing his own values above the needs of the state Cato would not have been acting as an ideal Roman male.

Even after calling Cato a most ingenious man and an elite with *virtus* Cicero depicted him as acting outside of the Roman ideal because Cicero needed to win the case (*Pro Murena* 61). This was a rhetorical strategy on Cicero's part which serves as a case study of an important phenomena in gender theory. Gender performativity posits that individuals actively construct their gender identity through both public and private performances of their gender. These performances are also influenced by our peers and the world around us. Likewise, the Roman elite had to perform their status as elite men and that it was a performance that was

constantly being judged, approved, and critiqued by their peers. Given Cato's reputation for being a man with great *virtus* he probably felt as though his authority was enough to vindicate his prosecution. However, Cicero carefully deconstructs Cato's stoic ideals in order to show that he was being overly zealous and a vehement prosecutor (*Pro Murena* 58). According to Cicero Cato was using his personal power and excessive popularity to influence the court (*Pro Murena* 59). From this perspective it can be shown that Cato seemed to be acting hyper-masculine. Cicero turns Cato's character on its head to point out that he tried to uphold these values to the point of it being harmful. He goes on to explain while Cato excelled in virtue, he lacked lenity (*Pro Murena* 64).

It can be shown that Cicero's depiction of Cato's stoicism was not only a critique of his rigid beliefs but a challenge of his manhood. While Cato was undoubtedly a well-respected elite male, the conflict in the *Pro Murena* makes it evident that he had to consistently defend and perform his *virtus* in front of his peers. And if, according to Cicero, he did not show himself to be acting out of *virtus* he would have indeed been an improper judge for the case, and not performing as a Roman elite was expected. Cicero depicts Cato as acting overly masculine because he needed to show Cato as an improper judge, but since Cato was a well-respected advocate Cicero had to exaggerate his character in order to weaken his prosecution.

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