THE POLITICS OF IMMORALITY
IN ANCIENT ROME

The question this book addresses is not how immoral the ancient Romans were, but why the literature they produced is so preoccupied with immorality. The modern image of immoral Rome derives from ancient accounts which are largely critical rather than celebratory. Far from being empty commonplaces, these accusations constituted a powerful discourse through which Romans negotiated conflicts and tensions in their social and political order. This study proceeds by a detailed examination of a wide range of translated ancient texts, exploring the dynamics of their rhetoric, as well as the ends to which they were deployed. Roman moralising discourse, Edwards suggests, may be seen as especially concerned with the articulation of anxieties about gender, social status and political power. This revised edition contains a substantial new Introduction which engages with critical and scholarly developments in the study of Roman culture since the original publication.

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THE POLITICS OF IMMORALITY IN ANCIENT ROME

SECOND EDITION

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Birkbeck, University of London

with a Foreword by

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University of Cambridge

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For my parents

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Foreword

Few cultures are as notorious for their fighting, feasting and philandering as ancient Rome. Early Christian writers cemented Rome's reputation for bad behaviour: it was, in their eyes, both key to the empire's decline and grounds for radical reform. And it was an easy charge to levy. Sources from Catullus and Cicero to Petronius and Suetonius were already judging Rome's citizens, trading tales of debauchery, prodigality, crimes against nature, often involving those who held the power and the purse strings. Society needed saving. But an empire as expansive as Rome had also to be disproportionate, its consumption conspicuous and off the scale. How to succeed, exceed and yet remain true to one's roots? The answer was different for different constituencies: by virtue of their position, emperors, though exemplary, played by different rules, just as the gods played by different rules. But the need to ask the question was a weakness in Rome's armoury that Christianity exploited, keeping morality, the body and abstinence at the top of the agenda.

Few cultures have been as obsessed with their own bad behaviour as Rome: with the spread of Christianity, pagan Rome got what it asked for. Yet when Cambridge University Press published Catharine Edwards' *Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* in 1993, this obsession was arguably taken seriously as rhetoric for the first time – not simply as a disease to be cured, but as a discourse that aimed at policing the powerful of an increasingly multicultural city at the centre of an opportunity-rich world. As Edwards points out, unlike the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which dwelt on the vices of the poor, the priority for elite Romans was each other's vices, and the detailing and curbing of these vices in public oratory, literature and law-making. What the poor did was rarely relevant: they had no power. And power or exclusivity was what this was about. As the Republic bled into empire, giving individuals unprecedented authority, wealth and the cultural capital that came of conquest, especially conquest of Greece, what it meant to be and look elite Roman was challenged and in need of reassertion.

One man's meat became another man's poison, as how one inhabited the world was brought under the microscope.

In five short, interrelated chapters on vices from adultery to luxurious building, Edwards delicately unpicks the Roman politics of invective, attuning her reader to the often subtle and ever-shifting distinction between (in)elegance and aberration, and to how what is or is not perceived as natural is always in service to the pervading cultural system. Inevitably, manliness looms large here, as does the fancy footwork between masculine and feminine that defined the meaning of Roman manliness in the eyes of other men. All things being equal, women had no more power than the poor – it was *men's* capacity to control themselves and their women that was at issue. Yet from where we are sitting today, there are some surprises – not least that a man could be labelled as simultaneously soft and a stud precisely because both imply an overindulgence more commonly associated with what was seen as the weaker sex. More striking, with hindsight, is Edwards' recognition of active and passive as so slippery, and masculinity as so complex and fragile. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (first published in 1990 and not in the bibliography), with its emphasis on the performative aspects of gender in and through social interaction, was only beginning to have its momentous impact, and Classicist Maud Gleason was still working on *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (1995), which studies the successful orator, his voice-control and gestures, as the 'ideal of cultivated manliness'. Edwards' discussion of actors in Rome, their seductive display and license to speak, all the while being dangerously dissimilatory, remains particularly influential.

Edwards' thinking is informed by being in Cambridge and Bristol in the late 1980s, early '90s. During her doctorate at Cambridge, seminars led by the then Professor of Ancient History, Keith Hopkins, galvanised Edwards – and friends, Tamsyn Barton, Jas Elsner, Jamie Masters, Jonathan Walters and Emily Gowers among them – to produce work on Roman history that coalesced around Foucauldian questions of culture, representation, power and knowledge. Gowers' *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* came out the same year as *Politics of Immorality*, and perhaps explains why Edwards does not devote more space to eating. Barton's *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics and Medicine Under the Roman Empire* (1994) and Elsner and Masters' *Reflections of Nero* (1994), to which Barton, Edwards and Gowers contributed, are also already in the bibliography and, like *The Loaded Table*, inform its vision. The co-supervisors of Edwards' doctorate with Hopkins, Mary Beard and John Henderson, and their colleague, Maria Wyke, contributed to complexifying the relationship

of literature and culture. In Bristol, meanwhile, where Edwards taught, Denis Feeney had just published *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition*, which again privileges themes of representation and power in its focus on reality and unreality.

None of this would have been possible without what had been happening in Paris and North America, where, fuelled by the sexual revolutions of the '60s and '70s, second-wave feminist approaches came together with New Historicism to make sexual codes, bodies, collective psychology, obscenity and so on fair game for serious scholarly treatment. Foucault is but the tip of the iceberg in this regard. Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1989) was a game-changer, but so too was the work of Amy Richlin, Carlin Barton and Paul Veyne, all of them in Edwards' bibliography. Veyne even makes the main text: 'Sexuality in the ancient world and sexuality in our own day are two structures which have nothing in common and are not even to be compared. They are not to be placed on a scale ranging from the repressive to the permissive' (p. 65). Like all of Edwards' discourses, it is to be studied as an aspect of a specifically Roman culture.

Today, increasing emphasis on cognitive, transhistorical and global approaches puts pressure on this cultural specificity. Queer theory is a further source of productive disruption, breaking down binaries such as masculine/feminine, insider/outsider, public/private, and critiquing the dominance of the Foucauldian model to construct counter-narratives. Who knows where this will lead? Already, work on the term *Romanus* in Latin literature, epigraphy and graffiti, and on the implications of its usage for issues of identity, threatens to blow a hole in the *Romanitas* (a very rare word in antiquity) that Edwards claims her writers' moralising discourse is policing.

This state of play makes reading this new edition more, not less, important – and not just for what it says, but for the scholarship it has stimulated since its publication. Not only are the seeds of some of Edwards' other books, *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City* (1996) and *Seneca: Selected Letters* (2019), as well as her translation of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (2008), planted in it, but much of my own work and that of countless others (whether Rebecca Langlands on sexual morality and exemplarity, or Joy Connolly on Roman rhetoric and identity-formation, including the 'unmanly aspects of politics') has imbibed its wisdom.

That *Politics and Immorality* is in the bloodstream attests to its sophistication and nuance. But it also makes it easy to underestimate the significance of its arguments at the time of publication. Turn its pages, and one is struck

by how often Edwards got there first. Like Stephen Hinds' *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (published in 1998 in the same Cambridge series as *Writing Rome*), it is not a stretch to say that it shaped the field. And it has its clarity and economy to thank for that, as well as a lightness of touch that belies its close reading and intricacy. Reading it today has the scales fall anew, asking that, if we do test innovative approaches, we start by making its chapters a primary object of critique.

Beyond the Academy, the bad behaviour of the Romans continues to spawn bestselling books that ask what its poets and emperors were really like, and first-wave Feminist Sarah Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (initially published back in 1975, but still in print) is, even now, considered a standard treatment of Roman life. Here there is still much to recoup in taking the rhetoric of the ancient sources seriously. Few do this better than Edwards' *Politics of Immorality* and with an elegance especially good to teach with.

Caroline Vout

Preface

Numerous debts, which it is a pleasure to acknowledge, have been
incurred in writing both this book and the Ph.D thesis on which it is
largely based. Keith Hopkins supervised the inception and com-
pletion of the thesis with his customary incisiveness; if this book can
lay any claim to clarity or elegance, it is largely due to him. As part of
the Cambridge regime of musical supervisors, Mary Beard and John
Henderson, in their different but equally stimulating ways, also
directed my research for a time. I am grateful, too, to John Crook,
Peter Garnsey, Fergus Millar, Paul Millet and Andrew Wallace-
Hadrill for their comments and criticisms. Friends from other
disciplines, David Feldman, James Laidlaw and Paul Taylor, in
particular, have also been generous with their time and helped me to
negotiate a number of theoretical problems. My sister Elisabeth
kindly read and commented on a draft as well.

Over the last two years, my colleagues in the Department of
Classics and Archaeology at the University of Bristol have provided
me with a challenging and supportive environment in which to think
and write. Particular thanks go to Denis Feeney, Duncan Kennedy,
Charles Martindale and Thomas Wiedemann, who read and com-
mented on draft versions of the book. I cannot claim to have
succeeded in answering all the criticisms offered but know I have
learnt a great deal from the attempt.

Introduction to the Cambridge Classical Classics edition

The immorality of the ancient Romans is a commonplace in modern representations of Roman antiquity. In nineteenth-century history painting, twentieth-century sword-and-sandal movies and twenty-first-century TV shows alike, inebriated Roman voluptuaries lounge on their couches surrounded by gleaming marble as they savour exotic foods and grope scantily dressed women and boys. Romans behaving badly certainly have box-office appeal but the details of their excesses in the modern imaginary are deeply rooted in the preoccupations of cultural commentators in Roman antiquity. The speeches of Cicero, the histories of Sallust, Livy and Tacitus, the philosophical works of Seneca, the Elder Pliny's observations about the natural world – all these texts (and more) return obsessively to the vices of their authors' fellow Romans, charting their sexual misbehaviour, their insatiable desire for luxury, their inability to subordinate their own pleasure to the public good.

What should we make of this moralising discourse? While Romans behaving badly have long loomed large in popular representations, serious academic historians, certainly in the mid-twentieth century, tended to ignore these ancient accounts of sexual and sumptuary excess, dismissing them as manifestations of a rather embarrassing sensationalism, a feature of Roman texts calculated to appeal to readers' baser instincts. Might these moralising claims repay more serious attention? I wondered. For many reasons, as *The Politics of Immorality* argues, we should hesitate to regard the claims Romans make about each others' excesses as a straightforward guide to how any individual (or group) actually behaved. But these claims can still be very revealing. They form a complex discourse whose rhetoric, I wanted to demonstrate, served a range of social and political purposes

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within Roman culture. My project was to investigate what might be at stake in these texts.

The Politics of Immorality started life in the Cambridge Classics Faculty, where I had the great good fortune to begin my doctoral research with Keith Hopkins, newly arrived as Professor of Ancient History. His distinctive intellectual energy, comparative agenda and critical acuity brought new verve – and a subversive edge – to a scholarly community already notable for its theoretically informed and interdisciplinary bent.[1] Keith's own work encompassed a formidable range of approaches, from hardcore statistical analysis to (in his later work) historical fiction involving time-travelling academics.[2] He was also particularly alert to the importance of stories as historical phenomena.[3] For some purposes, what matters is not whether a story is fact or fiction but rather who tells stories about whom – and what ends such stories serve.[4]

A briefly recounted anecdote, however implausible, can be made to disclose a great deal about the political discourse of which it forms part. Mary Beard, in her *Emperor of Rome*, describes the colourful stories told about early third-century emperor Elagabalus as 'precious evidence …for how Romans imagined an emperor at his very, very worst'.[5] Elagabalus is alleged, for instance, to have suffocated guests at a banquet with a shower of 'violets and other flowers' from a cleverly constructed ceiling.[6] The story combined ingenious imperial cruelty with the kind of sumptuary extravagance only one who commanded the resources of an empire could deliver.

[1] The collection of essays in Edwards and Woolf 2003, our stealth *Festschrift* for Keith, captures something of the intellectual atmosphere (see also Kelly's introduction to Hopkins 2017; 'stealth Festschrift' is his phrase, p. xii). The establishment of the 'X' caucus in the 1980s placed interdisciplinary courses on topics such as 'the body' at the centre of the undergraduate curriculum. Mary Beard and John Henderson were also key influences and I learned much from conversations with my fellow doctoral students, particularly Tamsyn Barton, Jas Elsner, Emily Gowers, Christopher Kelly and Greg Woolf, scholars whose work has shone new light on so many facets of ancient Roman culture.

[2] Examples of the former include the hugely influential 'Taxes and Trade' ([1980] = Hopkins 2017: 213–59), of the latter *A World Full of Gods* (1999). Kelly's introduction to Hopkins 2017 offers an insightful overview. See also the wide-ranging review of the volume by Noreña 2022.

[3] 'Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery' [1993] = Hopkins 2017: 398–424.

[4] A key concern of the anthropologically inspired New Historicist work of Robert Darnton, Stephen Greenblatt and others on early modern cultures, which had considerable influence on many ancient historians. For an overview of New Historicist approaches, see LaCapra 1988.

[5] Beard 2023: 5.

[6] SHA *Elag.* 21.5. The story captured the imagination of many in later periods. Visual representations include Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888). His substitution of roses for SHA's violets has been very influential. On Alma-Tadema's fascination with ancient Rome, see Prettejohn 1996.

The structure and the details of memorably lurid stories told about the immoral behaviour of emperors offered ways for subjects to articulate the complex feelings living under an autocracy might evoke. But these stories have their roots in the richly complex moral and political discourses of the Roman republic. As the speeches of Cicero make clear, individual members of the Roman elite were outspoken and imaginative in the vices they attributed to their political enemies.[7] In the history-writing of Cicero's contemporary Sallust, sexual and sumptuary vices, together with a more general lack of respect for the norms of aristocratic behaviour, are identified as causes of political breakdown.

While the operation of Roman moral discourse changed over time, becoming focused under the principate particularly on the behaviour of individual emperors, important common features persist, as *The Politics of Immorality* sought to argue. Looking back, several decades after the original publication of the book, I would still want to underline the centrality of this moralising discourse to Roman culture – and its deeply political character. At the same time, this new edition gives me an opportunity to reflect on some of the limitations of my 1993 work. And, of course, a great deal of more recent scholarship has moved the subject on in exciting ways. In what follows I shall touch on a few important developments.

Challenging Romanness

A striking feature of laments about Roman moral decline and invective against the immorality of individual Romans is the claim, sometimes if not always explicit, that immoral behaviour is in some way a betrayal of Roman identity. We can thus see these texts, I wanted to argue in *The Politics of Immorality*, as on one level intimately concerned with the question of what it meant to be Roman. But I might, I now think, have put the term 'Roman' itself under rather more pressure than I did.

Historians of ancient Rome – and Greece, too – have long drawn productively on anthropological approaches to open up questions about the structures, rituals and discourses characteristic of these ancient Mediterranean cultures.[8] The influence of anthropology can, however, itself contribute to a sense that these cultures have self-evident boundaries, as we find ourselves

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[7] This attention to stories, indeed to texts, as historical phenomena can be characterised as part of a more general rhetorical turn among cultural historians from the later twentieth century. In relation to imperial Rome, the role of such stories is well emphasised by Bartsch 1994 and Haynes 2003.

[8] In the first chapter of *Death and Renewal*, for instance, Hopkins comments 'I have been much influenced by C. Geertz' brilliant essay "Deep play: notes on a Balinese cockfight"' (1983: 1 n. 1).

generalising about 'the Romans'.[9] The fundamentally hybrid and plural nature of 'Roman' culture, not just in recently conquered zones of the empire but also at its heart, has been a focus of increasing attention in recent decades.[10] Indeed, we might speculate that this plurality and hybridity served to fuel the intensity of debate among individuals and communities about what it could mean to be Roman.

The word *Romanitas* in the sense of 'Romanness' is often taken as a key analytical term by modern scholars of Roman culture.[11] It is certainly, I must confess, co-opted in this sense in *The Politics of Immorality* (p. 2). As critics have noted, however, in classical antiquity *Romanitas* was an 'all but non-existent term'. Absent from the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, the standard work of reference documenting Latin usage (in pagan authors) up to 200 CE,[12] the word *Romanitas* occurs first only in the work of the Christian Tertullian, *De pallio* ('On the Cloak'), a critique of those in his native Carthage who sought to emulate the habits of Rome by wearing the toga (4.1).[13] Writing in Latin in the early third century CE in one of the greatest cities of the western Roman empire, Tertullian appears not to view himself as a Roman. Instead, the identity he projects (at least in some of his works) is Christian, and perhaps specifically African, an identity defined in contrast to Roman paganism.[14] *Romanitas*, then, is a concept coined by a self-consciously hostile outsider, one who, in promoting the authority of Christianity, sought to drive a wedge between Romanness and morality.[15]

Yet Tertullian (like quite a few others in the brilliant intellectual world of late second- and early third-century CE Carthage) was deeply immersed in earlier Latin literature; indeed, he had a particular soft spot for the moralising of the Younger Seneca.[16] While his native language may well have been Punic, he was highly trained as a Latin rhetorician. The word

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[9] The problems associated with the idea of 'bounded cultures' for anthropologists are insightfully explored by Laidlaw 2014, esp. 23–32. Particularly when we were doctoral students in the mid- to late 1980s, James Laidlaw was my expert guide to anthropological theory.

[10] See e.g. Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Dench 2018.

[11] Noted by Dench 2005: 15.

[12] Adams 2003: 184.

[13] On this work see Wilhite 2007: 139–45; Hunink 2005; Leyerle 2019. Tertullian makes no explicit mention of Christianity in *De pallio*, and sometimes invokes the associations of the *pallium* with Greek philosophy (3.7, 4.1, 6.1). More emphatic, however, is the role of the *pallium* as a marker of African identity (e.g. at 1.3). The garment, evidently worn by Tertullian himself, is certainly counterposed to the distinctively Roman toga (*De pallio* 5).

[14] Wilhite 2007: 63–70 argues, particularly on the basis of *Ad nationes* and *Apologeticum*, that Tertullian identified himself as indigenous African (see also pp. 134–9).

[15] On the shifting sense of the key term *luxuria* in the writings of early church fathers, see Berno 2023: ch. 5.6.

[16] Tertullian refers to him as: *Seneca …noster* (*De anima* 20.3). See Nehring 2017; Torre 2015.

Romanitas is by no means the only addition to the Latin lexicon associated with this fertile linguistic innovator.[17]

The mismatch between uses of the term 'Roman' on the part of modern scholars and the practice of Roman and Greek texts has recently been highlighted by Myles Lavan. He focuses on the construction and perception of identities across the empire in the second century CE, but his comments also help our understanding of the ideas of Romanness deployed in earlier texts. Lavan underlines well the instability of 'the Romans' as a concept – and notes the rarity of the use of the term *Romanus* as a substantive. In second-century CE Latin texts, he observes, 'Romans' are rare and, when they do appear, they tend to be located in the past rather than the present.[18]

Debate continues over the degree to which 'being Roman' for any individual or group in the wider empire was a matter of language, clothing, behaviour or citizenship. Greg Woolf, for one, observes, in a discussion of the degree to which inhabitants of the Greek east might be said to have 'become Roman': 'Roman identity was based to an unusual degree on membership of a political and religious community with common values and *mores* (customs, morality and way of life).'[19] Certainly *mores* ('customs', 'morals') – a key term in *The Politics of Immorality* – are often presented by Romans and Greeks as a critical component of specifically Roman cultural identity.[20]

Reflecting on the complexity of Roman identity in the geographical work of Strabo, composed in the time of Augustus, Edward Van der Vliet describes the practice of distinguishing between Romans and non-Romans in terms of 'narrowing, concentric circles'. He continues 'among "Romans" circles of identity should be drawn in respect of their distance from the centre of power: the emperor and his family, the higher administrators and commanders, and next those who support them in the exercise of their tasks – and here Strabo places himself – and, finally the subject population'.[21] This formulation captures well the sense pervasive in many Roman and some Greek texts that the Roman political elite, those who

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[17] Wilhite 2007: 133. See further Braun 1997.
[18] Lavan 2020: 41. Following Wallace-Hadrill 2008, Lavan underlines the particular connection of *Romanus* with citizenship as opposed to more culturally focused conceptions of Greekness, though he also observes that the term is sometimes used culturally to denote speakers of Latin as opposed to Greek. See also Lavan and Ando 2021. On Romanness in relation to language, see Elder 2022.
[19]   Woolf 1994: 120. See further Woolf 1998 on cultural identity and change in the Gallic provinces under the Roman empire. Dench 2005: 31 observes: 'defining Roman identity by reference to a single, imagined out-group was only a mode of self-perception, and it was one that never remotely attained the prominence of dividing the world into Hellenes and barbarians'.
[20] See e.g. Strabo 4.1.12.
[21] Van der Vliet 2003: 270–1. On Strabo see further Clarke 1999.

wield the greatest power in the Roman state, have a very particular role in exemplifying what it is to be Roman. Van der Vliet places the emperor and his family at the epicentre of his model. Recent work (to be explored further below) has thrown further light on how the shift to one-man rule altered the dynamics of Roman moral discourse.

The discourses which are the focus of *The Politics of Immorality* relate specifically and strikingly to the inner circle of elite Romans. These discourses are deeply concerned with policing what it meant to be Roman. The main contributors to Roman moral discourse, the most prominent voices in *The Politics of Immorality*, regard 'Romanness' as inherently positive (unlike the Christian Tertullian). But many of them did not themselves have the strongest claim to being Roman in the centralising sense articulated by Van der Vliet, for they were generally not members of the old Roman aristocracy.

The first man in his family to enter the Roman Senate, Cicero came not from Rome but from Arpinum, over 100 km away. His theoretical works in particular, his speeches also, if less explicitly, are deeply preoccupied with delineating what it is to be Roman and, especially, with asserting and articulating the distinctive virtues of the Roman political elite.[22] These are central concerns, for instance, of the treatises he composed in the 50s BCE (*De oratore*, *De re publica*, *De legibus*). The quotation from the second-century epic poet Ennius with which Cicero opens Book 5 of the *De re publica*, his treatise on the ideal state, *moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque*, asserts the dependence of the Roman state on both moral customs and men.[23] Here, at any rate, the *res romana* ('the Roman thing') is explicitly at stake when morality falters. While the Latin term *Romanitas* may carry distracting early Christian connotations, the concept of 'Romanness' is necessarily at the centre of my project.

Roman identity politics

In the mid-second century BCE, Polybius' Thucydidean analysis of the rise of Rome highlights the role of Roman institutions and Roman moral character in ensuring Rome's success. Roman virtue, he asserts, in particular the

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[22] See now Dench 2013. Corbeill characterises Cicero in his forensic speeches as: 'a public figure trying to define what it is to be a proper Roman' (2002: 215).

[23] 'The Roman state is based on ancient *mores* and on men'; see p. 20 below. For a more sceptical take on Cicero's attitude to earlier Roman practice, see Fox 2007, esp. ch. 4. On Cicero's use of Ennius, see now Čulík-Baird 2022, esp. 46–9. Important recent studies of the *De re publica* include Schofield 2021 and Zetzel 2022.

disposition to put community before personal gain, was a key factor in Rome's success against Carthage, commenting, for instance:

> τὰ περὶ τοὺς χρηματισμοὺς ἔθη καὶ νόμιμα βελτίω παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις ἐστὶν ἢ παρὰ Καρχηδονίοις παρ᾽ οἷς μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲν αἰσχρὸν τῶν ἀνηκόντων πρὸς κέρδος, παρ᾽ οἷς δ᾽ οὐδέν αἴσχιον τοῦ δωροδοκεῖσθαι καὶ τοῦ πλεονεκτεῖν ἀπὸ τῶν μὴ καθηκόντων· καθ᾽ ὅσον γὰρ ἐν καλῷ τίθενται τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ κρατίστου χρηματισμόν, κατὰ τοσοῦτο πάλιν ἐν ὀνείδει ποιοῦνται τὴν ἐκ τῶν ἀπειρημένων πλεονεξίαν.

> The laws and customs relating to the acquisition of wealth are better in Rome than at Carthage. At Carthage nothing resulting in profit is regarded as disgraceful; at Rome nothing is considered more disgraceful than to accept bribes and seek gain from unworthy channels. The strength with which they approve moneymaking by respectable means is matched by their condemnation of unscrupulous gain from forbidden sources.

> (Polybius 6.56)

The Romans who were Polybius' informants in the mid-second century attached great significance to this alleged contrast between Carthaginian and Roman attitudes to money, asserting a specifically Roman concern with putting honour ahead of profit.

But Polybius himself has the Elder Cato, an influential voice in second-century BCE Rome, reflect on the corrosive effects on Roman morals of money, imported habits and unchecked desires. These are disturbing harbingers, Polybius implies, of trouble to come (31.25.4–7).[24] Recent decades have seen some exciting and sophisticated work on the Elder Cato's strategic deployment in his own writings of the discourse of moral tradition and moral distinction. We can now much better appreciate, I think, Cato's particular contribution to some key features of Roman moral discourse as it developed in the second century BCE.

Individual aristocratic families had earlier reinforced their superior political position with references to their own distinguished ancestors, their *maiores*, in the contexts of family funerals and electoral campaigning particularly.[25] Both in his speeches, which were circulated in written form, and in his other work, such as the *Origines*, an account of the history of Rome and other Italian communities, Cato (a man with no senior magistrates among his own ancestors, who hailed from Tusculum some miles distant from Rome) insistently highlights Roman communal enterprise rather than the achievements of named individuals.[26] Cato's pioneering work

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[24] This passage is discussed in Chapter 5, below. On the complexity of Polybius' analysis of Rome's trajectory, see Champion 2004.

[25] See Blösel 2000.

[26] Sciarrino 2004 and 2011 ch. 4.

articulates a way of connecting back to Roman ancestors as a collective – a strategy ideally suited to the new man, who could not invoke distinguished individual forebears of his own. The virtue of Rome's ancestors taken as a group was a virtue to which any (wealthy, educated, free-born, male) Roman might aspire. At the same time, this shared ethos of virtue was also figured as a mainstay of the Roman state.

Over the course of the second and first centuries BCE, as the profits of empire flowed into Rome and the elites of other Italian towns, having now acquired Roman citizenship, came to focus their political ambitions on the greater opportunities that might be available to them in the Roman political system, aristocratic competition became ever more intense. Individuals strove for distinction through all available means, including assertions of their own moral uprightness, assertions which often involved impugning the moral character of political opponents. In the armoury deployed in Rome's increasingly competitive political arena, accusations of immorality had a key part to play.

These accusations might feature in speeches given in the forum or Senate house; they might also appear in more lasting form in literary texts. Tom Habinek's work has teased out further the role of literature 'as a medium through which competing sectors of Roman society sought to advance their interests over and against other sources of social and political authority'.[27] As Brandon Reay observes of Cato (commenting particularly on the moves made by his treatise on agriculture, *De agricultura*), he 'seems to have been keenly, if not precociously, attuned to literature's superior potential as a weapon in the relentless competition for individual distinction within the larger aristocratic milieu'.[28]

Appeals to the Roman past are central to this discourse. The ways *mores maiorum* ('the customs of the ancestors') were conceptualised and deployed under the republic have been the focus of a number of recent studies focused on Roman political culture.[29] Some scholars are still inclined to view Roman *mores* as a stable set of norms whose prescriptions were clearly agreed and understood. Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, for instance, in his influential and important study of the republic's political culture, analyses it as a system operating in accordance with 'received rules enshrined in *mos maiorum*'. He goes on to comment that *mos maiorum* above

[27] Habinek 1998: 3.
[28] Reay 2005: 340
[29] Notably Linke and Stemmler 2000; Braun *et al*. 2000. Gildenhard 2001, in his incisive review of these two collections, takes issue with the assumption underlying many of their contributions that Roman *mores* underwent little change from the third to the first century BCE.

all 'made the Roman republic's "capacity for self-regulation" possible'.[30] Certainly there are reasons for supposing a greater degree of consensus across Roman society in the middle republic than was the case in the first century BCE. The contested nature of *mores maiorum* in the final decades of the republic can seem painfully obvious to the modern reader, as *The Politics of Immorality* sought to underline. A good case can also be made, however, for regarding them as fluid from their very inception.[31] Stressing their politically interested character, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill's discussion of appeals to ancestral custom in ancient Rome has brought out with particular clarity how unstable this emotive notion always was. *Mores maiorum* might constitute a source of ill-defined authority for whatever was claimed to be established practice, implying 'a seamless web between past and present'. They might also serve as a justification for challenging the actions of one's political opponents.[32] Invoked as much by politicians of a more progressive persuasion as by conservatives, they were forever being renegotiated – and disputed.

Accusations of immorality regularly focus on luxury as a corrosive force and hark back to the virtuous simplicity of earlier times (a particular concern of Chapter 4 below). *Frugalitas* ('prudent husbandry' or 'moderate living') is often treated as a key term in characterisations of old-fashioned Roman virtue. Ingo Gildenhard and Cristiano Viglietti's recent study of *frugalitas* highlights that this supposedly 'traditional' Roman virtue is to a significant degree an artefact of the first century BCE.[33] Cicero, in his prosecution of Gaius Verres, on trial for his corrupt governorship of Sicily, articulates a stark contrast between the hard work and *frugalitas* of new men such as Cicero himself (qualities redolent, he suggests, of earlier generations) and the dissolute shamelessness of the defendant.[34] Laudatory portraits of earlier Romans, we should note, almost invariably serve a more immediate purpose.

Both the sense of Romanness and the conception of virtue invoked in Roman moralising discourse are often explicitly rooted in the past. When Cicero in his *De re publica* quotes Ennius on the character of the *res romana*, he underlines the poet's status as a representative of earlier times.[35]

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[30]   Hölkeskamp 2010: 18.
[31]   A feature alluded to but not fully explored in *The Politics of Immorality* (p. 1).
[32]   Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 213–31, quotation from p. 218. See further Bettini 2000.
[33]   Gildenhard and Viglietti 2020.
[34]   See particularly Gildenhard 2020. As he underlines, it is not irrelevant to Cicero's lexical choices that the law *De repetundis* to try cases of provincial maladministration had originally been set up by M. Pupius Piso Frugi. On the terms of Ciceronian invective more generally, see Corbeill 1996, 2002.
[35]   As Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 185 underlines.

The Politics of Immorality sought to stress the retrospective bent of many more general pronouncements on Roman moral character. At the same time, as has been elegantly brought out by John Dugan, Cicero's treatises of the 50s BCE feed closely into his self-construction, articulating a chain of personal relationships which connected him to the leading figures of the second century (fictionalised versions of whom are the interlocutors in the *De re publica*).[36] These were ideal *maiores*, carefully selected (and indeed reconfigured) to suit Cicero's own personal agenda and enhance his authority.

Masculine virtue and the performance of masculinity

In her generous and otherwise largely positive review of *The Politics of Immorality*, Amy Richlin noted that, other than in Chapter 1 on adultery, women came in for relatively little attention.[37] Certainly women have a presence in Roman moral discourse throughout the period with which my book is concerned. Moralists who reflect on the contrast between the idealised Roman past and the corrupt present sometimes highlight the role of the Roman matron presiding over her brood of future soldiers as a mainstay of ancient virtue;[38] conversely (and more prominently), lapses of *pudicitia* ('sexual rectitude') on the part of aristocratic Roman women, in particular, are a glaring symptom of moral – and political – disruption.[39] Women are sometimes (though not often) to be found on the receiving end of Ciceronian moralising invective, most notable among them Clodia, the sister of Publius Clodius Pulcher (the man who had engineered Cicero's exile in 58 BCE).[40] Clodia's profound untrustworthiness as a witness is established in Cicero's speech *Pro Caelio* through language which characterises this wealthy and aristocratic Roman matron as taking perverse pleasure in behaving like a prostitute.[41]

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[36] Dugan 2005: 194–6.
[37] Richlin 1994. Richlin herself has written with eloquence, insight and great humanity on Roman women and the challenges involved in recovering their history.
[38] Horace, *Carm. saec.* 13–24, though as McAuley 2016: 31–40 notes, the symbolic significance of mothers here has a particular political resonance in the context of Augustan Rome. Earlier literature tends to highlight rather the pre-eminent importance of male behaviour in this regard (see Milnor 2005: 150).
[39] On the configuration of *pudicitia* see Langlands 2006.
[40] Corbeill 2002.
[41] On the legal disabilities associated with prostitution, highlighting the connection with untrustworthiness, see Edwards 1997. On the significance of allusions to prostitution in the *Pro Caelio* see McCoy 2008. For a detailed comparison of the figures of *matrona* and *meretrix*, see Strong 2016.

Under the principate, criticism of women's sexual and sumptuary vices is aimed above all at the emperor's female relatives – and to be found predominantly in history and biography composed in the reign of a later ruler (though no doubt often originating in stories circulated at the time). This focus on the imperial family is no surprise given that, as *The Politics of Immorality* sought to demonstrate, Roman moralising takes the powerful as its primary target. Numerous imperial women of the first century CE, in particular, are criticised for their excesses. Claudius' wife Messalina became a byword for unbridled *libido*.[42] Nero's wife Poppaea dissipated a fortune on bathing in asses' milk.[43] But notable differences remain between the vices associated with men and those associated with women – in the sphere of sexual behaviour, unsurprisingly, but also in other respects. Some women are, like Poppaea, accused of sumptuary extravagance. But the outrageous excesses of emperors' building projects, for instance, are never laid at the door of imperial women.[44] A number are criticised for aspiring to influence beyond that deemed appropriate for their sex.[45] Even under the republic, however, this strategy already operated in invective, often as a means to criticise a male politician for failing to control his female relatives (Clodia's alleged behaviour does not reflect well on her brother Clodius). In praising the emperor Trajan for his wise choice of the modest Plotina as his spouse, Pliny makes clear that many previous Roman emperors have let themselves – and the Roman state – down in this respect (*Paneg.* 83.4).[46] While some women (particularly members of the imperial family) might enjoy the power conferred by great wealth, by intellect, by influential relatives, by certain kinds of patronage – even by physical beauty – Rome remained a fundamentally patriarchal society in which *imperium* was only ever exercised by men and only men might legitimately have a political voice.

More general claims about the femininity of weakness, moral as well as physical, permeate Roman moralising, however. Roman virtue is intrinsically masculine. Myles McDonnell's study of Roman manliness rightly highlights the importance of the etymology of the term *virtus*, cognate with *vir* ('man'), for its significance.[47] McDonnell suggests that the *virtus* associated with military prowess might sometimes be exemplified by morally

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[42] Joshel 1995; Wyke 2002.
[43] Pliny, *NH* 11.238, 28.183. Her favourite mules were said to be shod with gold (*NH* 33.140).
[44] Augustus' granddaughter Julia is perhaps an exception. Suetonius records (*Aug.* 72) that Augustus demolished an extravagant villa she had commissioned (see further p. 166 below).
[45] Most conspicuously, Livia and the Elder and Younger Agrippinas. See Purcell 1986; Ginsburg 2005. Such characterisations of female members of the imperial family are also prominent in relation to early third-century figures, such as Julia Domna. See Scott 2017 and Mallan 2013.
[46] See further Roche 2002.
[47] McDonnell 2006.

questionable individuals. Even by Cicero's time, though, this morally neutral military sense of *virtus* was no longer dominant. Carlos Noreña, in his analysis of the virtues attributed to emperors, understands *virtus* as having the sense of 'valour in the service of the state'.[48] In public praise of political leaders, even under the republic, this sense of *virtus* is certainly important. But *virtus*, from the late republic on, was radically complicated by engagement with Greek philosophical articulations of *arete*.[49] Women might indeed exemplify this type of *virtus*, but a frisson of paradox often accompanied such attributions; the association of *virtus* with masculinity was never entirely absent.[50]

Under the principate, a more military sense of *virtus* remained important in some contexts. It was for his *virtus* in military command that Trajan, for instance, was celebrated, through his coinage and in Pliny's speech praising the new emperor (the role of visual imagery in articulating imperial virtue has been well brought out in recent years).[51] But Stoic thinkers of the principate, the Younger Seneca above all, were building further on the philosophical understanding of *virtus* already evident in Cicero's work. Seneca, himself close (indeed too close for his own good) to imperial power, articulates a notion of *virtus* which draws on the traditional military connotations of *virtus* in Roman culture but translates them into a different sphere, to emphasise the significance – and the difficulty – of the inner challenges the would-be wise person must face.[52] For the Stoics, *virtus*, in the sense of virtue, is the only requirement for a happy life; the Stoic wise person has learned to recognise the fundamental unimportance of anything other than moral character. The greatest triumph now was thus one celebrated over one's own worldly desires for, and fears of, external goods and ills: *imperare sibi maximum imperium est* ('the greatest empire is empire over oneself', Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 113.30). This was the proper sphere for the exercise of *virtus*.

The kind of *virtus* advocated by Seneca might be put into practice by an invalid on his sick bed or by a person under instructions from the emperor to

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[48] Noreña 2011: 78–9.
[49] As Kaster 2007, reviewing McDonnell, observes. McDonnell himself does acknowledge this shift.
[50] Edwards 2007: ch. 7.
[51] Trajan's military *virtus* is highlighted in coinage of his reign and constitutes a central theme of Pliny's *Panegyric*. See Roche 2011: 9. Noreña 2011, esp. 77–82, offers an insightful analysis of *virtus* on Roman coinage. The imperial family's monopoly over the ritual of the triumph – the ultimate celebration of military *virtus* – underlines the centrality of *virtus* to the imperial image. See Beard 2007: 68–71, though she notes that ancient authors do not themselves make a great deal of this monopoly.
[52] Though the distinction between literal and metaphorical in his writing is often an unstable one, as Bartsch 2009 underlines.

take his own life.[53] The physical violence associated with the martial aspect of *virtus* could in the latter case be thought of as turned inward. According to this austere Stoic logic, self-destruction, under some circumstances, is an act of outstanding virtue.[54] To be sure, the struggle in which the individual hopes to triumph in such a case is a struggle over the fear of death. But the self-command required by this kind of struggle is the same quality which is put to the test in overcoming apparently more trivial challenges, the desires for pleasure, wealth and status, dangerously insidious forces which (as Chapter 5 below demonstrates) assail the Roman aristocrat on a daily basis. *The Politics of Immorality* might, I now think, have done more to articulate the complexity of the relationship between Roman moralising discourse and Roman Stoicism.

The ethos of restraint and self-control articulated in Seneca's work resonates closely with earlier Roman ethical discourse in many respects.[55] The precise function of Stoic thought in aristocratic culture under the principate remains contested, however. Should we (following Tom Habinek) see philosophy as constituting merely a kind of cultural capital for Seneca – and others, too – a means to assert distinction for those lacking aristocratic forebears, who might nevertheless aspire to be part of an 'aristocracy of virtue' suited to life under autocracy?[56] For Habinek, Seneca's writing offers no serious challenge to the established practices of the Roman social and political elite. Certainly, there are some aspects of elite privilege (for instance, slave owning) which Seneca's arguments do not fundamentally question.[57] On Matt Roller's view, Stoic philosophy, as an arena outside imperial control, serves largely as a substitute for traditional elite political participation.[58] More recently, Carey Seal has highlighted Seneca's sensitivity to potential clashes between philosophy and the social norms prevailing among his contemporaries; Seneca's advocacy of the philosophical life is, on this reading, in continual dialogue with Roman elite values.[59] But insofar as the *virtus* Seneca celebrates involves a continual struggle against desires – for money, for status, for the pleasures of the flesh both sexual and sumptuary – it draws extensively on many elements of earlier Roman attacks on immorality. Francesca Romana Berno's interrogation of the Roman concept of *luxuria* focuses particularly on the centrality of desire, exploring

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53   Edwards 2021b.
54   Edwards 2007.
55   On the Roman ethos of restraint, see Kaster 2005.
56   Habinek 1992.
57   For Seneca's views on slavery, see Bradley 2008; Edwards 2009.
58   Roller 2001, esp. ch. 4.
59   Seal 2021. Cf. Edwards 2019.

the connection between *luxuria* and lust in Roman moralising discourse.[60]
It is this connection, she argues, which explains the particular place of
luxuria in the Stoic taxonomy of vices.

Accusations of effeminacy, allegations that men are behaving like women,
are often made in Roman texts and are the focus of Chapter 2 of *The Politics
of Immorality*. Such accusations often feature the figure of the *cinaedus*,
originally, it seems, a male dancer skilled in moving like a woman.[61]
The relationship between this aspect of Roman moralising discourse and
attitudes to sexual behaviour continues to be debated. An article by Richlin,
which also appeared in 1993, focused particularly on the figure of the *cinae-
dus* in Roman culture, taking this term to have as its primary meaning men
who liked to be penetrated by other men.[62] Richlin sees such individuals as
a distinct social group in Rome (and Greece), with a particular subculture –
and regarded with disdain by most of their contemporaries.[63] Richlin's dis-
cussion of the *cinaedus* is informed, as is so much of her work, by a concern
for the lived experience of abjected subjects. More recently, Zachary Herz
has well underlined the importance of treating the 'discursively produced
type of the sexually deviant' as distinct from the lived experience of the
typecast.[64] I would myself still want to maintain that the term *cinaedus*, like
the adjective *mollis* ('soft'), carried connotations of effeminacy among which
the specifically sexual was not necessarily always the most salient.[65] Richlin's
concern to reflect on the lived experience of those regarded as sexual deviants
in Roman culture was characteristically in the vanguard. First published
in 1999, Craig Williams' *Roman Homosexuality* offers a comprehensive and
sophisticated analysis of Roman attitudes to sexual relations between men,
drawing out in meticulous detail, for instance, some key points of contrast
between the attitudes evinced in Roman texts and those to be found in
earlier Greek literature. He explores in depth the implications for our
understanding of Roman ideas of masculinity.[66]

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[60] Berno 2023, esp. ch. 5.
[61] Sapsford's finely nuanced study of the figure of the *cinaedus* (2022) stresses particularly an
association with expertise in distinctive kinds of music and dancing.
[62] On the politics of penetration, see Walters 1997, now nuanced by Williams 2010 and Kamen and
Levin-Richardson 2015.
[63] In support of this claim, she offers a close reading of Juvenal *Satire* 2 (Richlin 1993). On this text,
see now Herz 2023b, offering a persuasive new reading which challenges the claim that it depicts
two *cinaedi* 'marrying' one another.
[64] Herz 2023a: 416.
[65] Cf. Gleason 1995: 62–81.
[66] A second edition appeared in 2010. Rightly wishing to distinguish between pederasty and homo-
sexuality, he is keen to claim that Romans did not associate homosexual relationships with Greek
culture (Williams 2010: 69 n. 14), and takes issue with my comment that 'A taste for homosexual
relations might be associated with the "Greek" literary life' (p. 96 below). Chapter 2 of *The Politics*