# *Introduction*

*si tot exempla virtutis non movent, nihil umquam movebit.*

'If so many exemplary tales of virtue don't move you, nothing ever will.'

Livy *Histories* 22.60.14

## Tasting the Hero's Blood

The well-known mythographer Marina Warner has described the process of reading fairy-tales and folk-tales as 'tasting the dragon's blood' – a magical and transformative process by which one's ears are opened to the voices of the past and of other worlds.[1] Roman exempla, which constitute a national storytelling tradition, are very different in many ways from the dream-like fantasies of fairy-tales and other narrative folk traditions that have been the subject of Warner's studies.[2] In (supposedly) true stories from history, battle-hardened warriors, noble maidens and honourable sons of the soil face impossible dangers, take terrible decisions and sacrifice their lives, their limbs and even their own children for the sake of justice, discipline and the Roman community. Yet for the ancient Romans too, hearing the blood-soaked stories of their ancestral heroes was an intimate and potent experience, and this 'taste of the hero's blood' had an intoxicating effect similar to the blood of Warner's dragon: evoking other worlds, shaping understanding of their own world.

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. I have used the Teubner or Oxford Classical Texts editions of Latin texts where possible. Primary source abbreviations in the text generally follow conventions from Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary* and Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*.

[1] E.g. 'Stories come from the past but speak to the present (if you taste the dragon's blood and can hear what they say)', at www.marinawarner.com/home.html

[2] For Warner's substantial contribution to the study of the rich role played by fairy-tales in the Western tradition, see e.g. Warner 1994 on fairy-tales and fairy-telling; Warner 1998 on fear figures in Western storytelling; and most recently Warner 2011 on the tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

According to the descriptions found in ancient literature, exempla were capable of exerting an extraordinary, transcendent force upon those who contemplated them. The metaphors are often violent and uncomfortable. Exempla struck or dazzled the viewers, goaded and aroused them, inflamed the soul, and ultimately transformed them – through the process of emulation – into someone else, someone better.[3] In the words of Valerius Maximus, whose *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, a compilation of exempla written in the first century CE, provides the most substantial surviving evidence about Roman exempla, 'From such exemplary tales the goodness of the human race is nourished and augmented: these are the touch-papers, the spurs, by which the human race blazes with desire to do good and to deserve praise' (*his et horum similibus exemplis beneficentia generis humani nutritur atque augetur: hae sunt eius faces, hi stimuli, propter quos iuvandi et emerendi cupiditate flagrat*, Val. Max. 5.2.ext.4).[4]

An important factor in their transformative effect was their emotional impact.[5] For the second-century philosopher Favorinus, merely to read the centuries-old description by the famous historian Quadrigarius of the heroic duel between brave Manlius and the towering Gaul that had taken place five hundred years earlier was to be shaken and profoundly moved, as if he were present at the terrifying fight itself.[6] Retelling such tales of daring and loyalty in his collection of exempla, Valerius Maximus writes of the joy, despair, horror, pity, awe and admiration that one experiences by turns as one contemplates his array of historical heroes and villains. 'The spirit leaps up as it runs through memories of the greatest men' (*exsultat animus maximorum virorum memoriam percurrens*), he comments on his chapter of tales about heroes of Rome who displayed astonishing powers of abstinence and continence in relation to sex and wealth.[7]

[3] E.g. 'striking': *pulsibus* (Sall. *Jug.* 4.5); 'dazzling' (Sen. *Ep.* 120.5); burning: *ardor* and *accenderet* (Pliny *Pan.* 13.5); key Latin terms are *stimulus, obstupefacio, pulsus, mirari*. See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.32, 5.62 on the emotional impact of exempla. Cf. Guerrini 1981: 89, n.30 on the 'metalinguistic' quality (as he terms it) of terms such as *miror, mirus, horror, tristis, trux* and their derivatives. On the element of wonder, see Chapter 4.

[4] Val. Max. 5.2.ext.4, writing specifically here about virtuous acts that incurred gratitude. See also 2.1.10 on competition for virtue, whereby young Romans were inspired by hearing about the deeds of their ancestors.

[5] For the role of emotion in moral decision-making in Roman exempla and in modern psychology, see Chapter 4.

[6] As Aulus Gellius writes, 'The philosopher Favorinus used to say that when he read this passage in the book he was shaken and affected by emotions and blows no less than if he himself had been present watching them fight': *quem locum ex eo libro philosophus Favorinus cum legeret, non minoribus quati adificique animum suum motibus pulsibusque dicebat, quam si ipse coram depugnantes eos specataret* (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

[7] Val. Max. 4.3.13.

Seneca describes Roman children as stunned and awestruck (*obstupefecerant, mirari*) when they listen to exemplary stories and learn from them about virtue.[8] The effect of such stories on tender souls is dazzling and awe-inspiring[9]; learning from exempla is like 'falling in love' with the virtue they embody.[10] For the men who were to become the great Republican leaders, it was enough to gaze upon the portraits of ancestral heroes, on display in the halls of their descendants, for their hearts to be inflamed with desire to equal the virtues of old; their own great achievements were directly inspired by exempla.[11] The encounter with exempla was the process by which Roman heroes were made; it was a process of awe and wonder, of ardour, self-scrutiny and revelation that transcends the rational and the logical, and constitutes what we might today describe as a spiritual experience.

This book takes as its starting point this transcendental power of Roman exempla, and asks: What did the ancient Romans learn from their exempla, and how did they learn from them? In pursuit of answers, I began my study with a comprehensive survey and analysis of Latin literature (and relevant Greek literature), examining how exempla were deployed in texts of all genres and periods, the detailed content and nature of Roman exemplary stories and figures, and the things that the ancient authors say about exempla and about how one learns from them (although these latter are rare). Early on it became clear that there was such a wealth of relevant material that I needed to limit the chronological scope of my enquiry, and so for the most part this study runs only up to the end of the first century CE, and there is also very little dating from before Cicero in the middle of the first century BCE.

From this survey of surviving Roman literature, I have been able to extrapolate a fully formed and coherent 'exemplary ethics' that was in operation in ancient Rome, and this book gives a full account of this ethics from literary, philosophical and cultural perspectives. It is an ethics based

[8] For exempla as a kind of 'wonder tale', see further Chapter 3.

[9] Sen. *Ep.* 120 (discussed at length in Chapter 3).

[10] On 'falling in love' with virtue through exempla, see Inwood 2007: 185 (where he explains his translation of *adamare* at Sen. *Ep.* 71.5) and 193 on Sen. *Ep.* 71.19: 'The capacity for falling in love with virtue is based on our susceptibility to such examples.' Cf. Scipio, rejoicing in the exempla that Virtus sets before him (Sil. *Pun.* 15.121–123).

[11] According to Sall. *Jug.* 4.5, 'For I often heard that Q. Maximus, P. Scipio, and other leading men of our community used to say that when they gazed upon the masks of the ancestors, their soul was violently inflamed towards virtue. Certainly it was not the wax or its shape that had so much power over them, but that flame grew in the hearts of excellent men on account of the memory of great deeds, and it did not die down until their own virtue had become equal in fame and glory' (*nam saepe ego audivi Q. Maximum, P. Scipionem, praeterea civitatis nostrae praeclaros viros solitos ita dicere, cum maiorum imagines intuerentur, vehementissime sibi animum ad virtutem accendi. scilicet non ceram illam neque figuram tantam vim in sese habere, sed memoria rerum gestarum eam flammam egregiis viris in pectore crescere neque prius sedari, quam virtus eorum famam atque gloriam adaequaverit*).

on a body of exemplary stories which are used as a medium for communicating not only moral values (such as 'courage' and 'justice') but also ethical issues and debates, as well as a complex of meta-exemplary principles that guide learners in handling exempla and implementing their lessons. These include sensitivity to the difficulties of interpreting exemplary deeds, awareness of the importance of motivation and especially awareness of situational variability, whereby virtues must be enacted differently depending on the circumstances. Although this ethics was never explicitly theorised by the Romans themselves, it was likely to have been in operation from long before the testimony of our earliest texts. It is also an ethics that resonates with Aristotelian ethical thinking and modern virtue ethics, and that was highly influential on later traditions, including early and medieval Christianity. Not only, then, does this constitute a distinctive, sophisticated and coherent ethics in its own right, it also has an important role to play in the history of Western philosophical thought.

In starting from the idea that exempla are primarily *ethical* stories, this study approaches exempla from a different angle from that adopted by most recent scholarship, which tends to begin from their role within rhetoric and historiography.[12] While scholars have focused on the political and rhetorical work that exempla are performing in ancient texts, they have neglected to ask a more fundamental question about their cultural value, with which this book is concerned.[13] This book's approach to exempla is not merely as instruments of persuasion, with which orators and politicians seek to indoctrinate and coerce the masses, but rather as a shared cultural resource with which different members of society engage actively in different ways. As we shall see, the rhetorical and persuasive functions of exempla are intimately entwined with the ethical, and not separable from it, as is the role of exempla in recording and commemorating the past; this study serves to further illuminate the roles played by exempla in ancient historiography and in ancient rhetoric. However, in taking *ethics* as my point of entry rather than rhetoric or historiography, this study thus

[12] Cf. Chaplin 2000: 5; Roller 2009; Gowing 2009; Maslakov 1984; van der Poel 2009. For the definitions of exempla in ancient rhetorical handbooks, see *Rhet. ad Her*. 4.62, Cic. *Inv*. 1.49 and Quint. *IO*. 5.11.1–2, with Lausberg 1998: 196–203. See Gazich 1995 for a nuanced discussion of the rhetorical aspects of exemplum in the context of an analysis of Propertius' elegies. Cf. Morgan 2007a, which argues on the contrary for the ethical purpose of exempla in Roman culture and notes how odd it is that Valerius Maximus' collection of exempla is assumed to be solely rhetorical in purpose (pp. 125–126).

[13] My point here is similar to that made recently by Steinbock 2012 in relation to the cultural memory of ancient Athens.

underlines my commitment to the idea that the ethical value and role of exempla within Roman culture is primary, and that the historical and rhetorical are dependent upon this.

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Chapter 1, 'Roman Values and the Archetypal Exemplum' is the first step in evoking the story-world of the Roman exemplum; it sets out to convey something of its excitement and magic, of the moral values associated with it and of its ethical power. To that end it introduces a particular type of exemplum that I take as archetypal, featuring prominent, Republican heroes such as Valerius Corvinus, Marcus Curtius, Fabius Maximus, Fabricius, Horatius, Horatius Cocles – the kind of famous ancestral heroes, in other words, who are frequently reeled off by the Romans themselves as their moral inspiration.[14] Later in the book we will consider ways that this model changed and the kinds of exempla that do not fit within it, and other issues relating to social diversity, but it is important to lay this foundation for the study of exemplarity more broadly in Roman culture. Such stories remained foundational for so long within Roman culture, even as exemplary ethics changed and developed – even as their immediacy faded and new stories took their place.

This first chapter introduces the Roman exemplum as a particular literary and cultural form: a concise and punchy moral story with certain characteristic features. Analysis of three typical exemplary stories – those of the heroic deeds of Valerius Corvinus, Curtius and Mucius Scaevola – enables us to establish the nature of the archetypal Roman exemplum and the moral values with which it is typically associated (not least for readers who are not already familiar with the Roman material): bold and decisive acts of patriotic self-sacrifice, always violent and usually disturbing. These are straightforward and snappy tales of Roman heroism, but already in this chapter it will emerge that Roman exempla are characterised by inherent tensions that are related to the very idea of exemplarity and of learning from exempla. These include Roman history's perplexing moral recursiveness, the recurrence of moments of crisis when heroes are required to save the city and the community, the clash between the self-promotion and self-abnegation of heroes, and the tension between each hero's status as

[14] Examples of this in Latin literature are far too numerous to be listed here, and many will be discussed in the course of this book. A representative example is found in Cic. *Sest.* 143: 'Therefore let us imitate our own Brutus, Camillus, Ahala, Decius, Curius, Fabricius, Maximus, Scipio, Lentulus, Aemilius and many others who have established this state' (*quare imitemur nostros Brutos, Camillos, Ahalas, Decios, Curios, Fabricios, Maximos, Scipiones, Lentulos, Aemilios, innumerabiles alios, qui hanc rem publicam stabiliverunt*).

outstanding individual and as member of a community, as both exceptional instance and as normative representative of virtue.

Roman exempla shared some of the ethical power and nuance of narratives from other story-traditions such as fables and parables. This is the subject of Chapter 2, 'The Special Capacity of Exemplary Stories', which argues that exempla were the 'lifeblood of ethics' in ancient Rome. This chapter explains what is special about narrative as an ethical medium, and discusses the particular capacity of moral tales to play a role within cultures that is different from and complementary to other ethical media such as rules, guidelines and exposition. It draws on material from other story-traditions and scholarship from related disciplines for a better understanding of how exemplary stories and figures might contribute to ethical theory and practice in different cultures; in particular it uses comparison with features of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist tales and Confucian exempla, both story-traditions that are closely associated with philosophical traditions. In both cases, scholars have identified the exemplary tales themselves as a fundamental medium through which philosophical ideas are articulated and transmitted. These comparisons show how even stories that constitute a 'popular' ethical medium accessible to all members of a community do not necessarily embody ethical ideas at a lower level of sophistication than those of the philosophical and religious treatises where core ideas are articulated. In fact, this chapter argues that stories can have a special capacity for communicating complex ethical ideas without needing to resolve internal tensions, leaving room for multivalency within a single reading (simultaneous multivalency), as well as multivalency over time (serial multivalency). It is this capacity that underpins the success of Roman exemplary ethics.

Chapter 3, 'Exploitation, Participation and the Social Function of Exempla', then explores the way that a body of moral stories as an ethical resource can be embroiled within the power dynamics and status hierarchies of a community. Like Chapter 2, it approaches Roman exempla as a wisdom genre and uses comparative material from other storytelling traditions to help develop a framework within which we can understand aspects of Roman exemplary ethics even in the absence of direct testimony from the ancient world. This chapter responds to prevalent ideas about exempla as a prescriptive and top-down tool of social control. It explores the power dynamics that can be in play when exempla are used to inculcate certain types of behaviour, and seeks to counter the prevalent idea that exempla are necessarily a prescriptive and authoritarian mode of delivering moral education. One of the broader aims of this book is to demonstrate

that the dynamics of exemplary ethics are far more complicated than the prevalent top-down model allows for, and that, even within a hegemonic, authoritarian and conservative milieu, agency, resistance, exploration, moral reflection and moral transformation are always in play. This chapter establishes a model for making this case about Roman exempla in particular.

As we have seen, according to the ancients themselves, Roman exemplarity is experienced as a thrilling opportunity rather than as the deadening hand of prescriptive moralising. This third chapter makes the case that, despite the fact that exempla were shaped by the political agenda of particular powerful members of Roman community, at their core is a more fundamental *ethical* value which is limited neither by the political ends, nor the moralising ends, nor the rhetorical ends to which an exemplary tale may also be used again and again. The deployment of exemplary tales by the Maoist state in twentieth-century China in an attempt to shape the behaviour of Chinese citizens and inculcate Maoist ideologies provides an extreme comparison of the use of exempla by an authoritarian regime that can help us to understand both the mechanisms and motivations of use of exemplary stories by hegemonic powers. However, this case also usefully reveals the limitations of such authoritarian use of exempla and shows that exemplary ethics must always incorporate the possibility of resistance and reappropriation. The model offered by a study of Buddhist tales in contemporary Thailand by Justin McDaniel is then used to show how an ethical resource can function simultaneously in multiple ways within a community, providing different uses for different members, while binding them all into the same ethics. It suggests that we think in terms not of exploiters and exploited, but rather in terms of *participants* in exemplary ethics.

This idea of a body of exemplary stories comprising an ethical resource that is shared across a community to facilitate ethical learning, development and discussion among all kinds of different participants will underpin the discussion in following chapters. Chapter 4, 'The Experience of Learning from Exempla', is the philosophical heart of the book and traces the complex process by which exemplary tales contributed to ethical learning and development in ancient Rome. This chapter outlines the various stages and aspects of moral learning that constitute exemplary ethics and the detailed moral framework within which members of the Roman community engaged with exemplary tales. Building on the idea that Roman exemplary ethics is a participatory rather than an exploitative mode of learning, this chapter focuses on the experience of the individual

engaging with exempla rather than on the intentions of those who deploy them.

This chapter argues that the learning process at the centre of exemplary ethics is richer and more interesting than it is usually assumed to be by modern scholars,[15] and looks rather like the practical enactment of Aristotle's ideal moral education.[16] Roman exempla inspire and teach by evoking an emotional response, often using wonder and horror to hook the learner; they encourage people to compare themselves to others, and they instil a desire to compete and to emulate others so as to attain the qualities of excellence that they see manifested in these individuals, by giving them a sense of the possibility of this attainment, by enabling them to gain an understanding of virtue in the abstract and by facilitating the testing and exploration of ethical ideas and assumptions. This model of moral learning is extrapolated from my analysis of the ancient texts, but it is elucidated further by modern philosophical discussion that explores various aspects of what I have called 'exemplary ethics' – that is to say, an ethics that is based on learning from and through examples and role models. These include modern discussions of Aristotelian virtue ethics and the 'exemplarist ethics' theorised by Linda Zagzebski. Each of these theorises the role of examples in moral learning in ways that chime with what we find in the Roman texts, and help to clarify how the Roman system might have functioned. Key features of Roman exemplary ethics that emerge from this study are those of creative imitation and critical thinking, which ensure that there is a degree of autonomy allowed for participants, even as they are guided by exempla.

The ethical imitation (*imitatio* or *aemulatio*) that is a key element of this learning process therefore has much in common with the literary *imitatio* much practised and theorised in ancient literature, which emphasised the independence and creativity involved in engaging with and reworking the words and ideas of one's literary predecessors.[17] Viewing it within this particular ancient context allows us to recuperate 'imitation' from the prevalent post-classical viewpoint, which tends to see it as a conservative and mechanistic process, and exempla therefore as a prescriptive, top-down and inflexible teaching tool.[18] Imitation has been especially deprecated in the light of the strong value attached in later, post-Enlightenment Western tradition to autonomy, independence and

[15] See also Langlands forthcoming.
[16] A preliminary form of this argument is outlined in Langlands 2015a.
[17] For a thorough discussion of this, see Russell 1979.
[18] See, for instance, the assumptions that underlie Brown 1983, Lyons 1989 and Burke 2011.

individuality, with which it is seen to be at odds. Indeed, in the post-classical philosophical tradition 'imitation' is often a dirty word, implying deep conservatism, moral straightjacketing and repression of autonomy. An extreme but by no means unrepresentative expression of this idea is Ralph Waldo Emerson's declaration, in his 1841 essay promoting 'Self-Reliance', that 'imitation is suicide'. Commenting on this famous and often-cited line in the light of contemporary ethics, Jeffrey Stout has more recently argued that, while there is a danger that imitation of models becomes 'slavish idolatry' and 'subservience', what is required to combat this tendency is an appreciation of oneself and a cultivation of 'self-trust'.[19] As we will see, the Romans expressed similar anxieties about the potential difficulties and limitations of learning through exempla, and, importantly, offered practical strategies for combating such difficulties, if not overcoming them. This book will argue that for the ancient Romans ethical *imitatio* was not at odds with autonomy, but incorporated innovation, creativity and transgression just as literary *imitatio* did. Like the post-Enlightenment thinkers, Roman exemplary ethics, too, appreciated the need to strike a balance between the emulation of models of excellence and the need to retain a sense of one's own individual nature and circumstance in relation to exempla.[20]

Chapter 5, 'Multiplicity, Breadth, Diversity and Situational Sensitivity in Exemplary Ethics', further explores how these principles are communicated through our Latin texts, and also shows how they enable Roman exemplary ethics to incorporate diversity and to function across different sectors of society. In particular, sensitivity to individual circumstances, 'situational sensitivity', was at the heart of Roman exemplary ethics, represented as a vital principle and skill to be exercised in the process of learning from exempla and applying them to one's own behaviour. This is the principle that it is important to be able to judge what the specific requirements of one's own situation are when one is making a moral decision, and to tailor the requirements of one's behaviour accordingly. This faculty of moral discrimination, to be refined over one's life and continually sharpened on the whetstone of Roman exempla, is the critical faculty with which Romans learned to engage with their exempla, and it is similar to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or 'critical thinking'.[21] It is also linked to social diversity and

[19] Stout 2004: 172.
[20] Indeed Stout's 'self-trust' corresponds to the important Roman virtue of *fiducia* or *fiducia sui*, which I have discussed in Langlands 2011 as an important aspect of exemplary ethics.
[21] For a preliminary outline of this argument, see Langlands 2015a. On a similar role for phronēsis in reading fables in Middle English literature, see Allen 2005: 12–18.

the widespread usefulness of exempla across the social spectrum as well as over time. This chapter also explores the important related roles that multiplicity plays in Roman exemplary ethics. For instance, the juxtaposition within individual texts or within the tradition as a whole of a range of different exempla relating to the same moral qualities helps to highlight situational diversity, as well as to prompt debates where stories clash with or nuance one another. The deployment of multiple exempla to illustrate a single moral category can also allow exempla to communicate a sense of the breadth and parameters of moral qualities. This helps individuals to situate themselves in relation to moral qualities and decide how best to enact them.

Chapter 6, 'Working Consensus around Roman Exempla', picks up on the idea of exempla as a shared resource that was explored in Chapter 2. As a practised system of virtue-ethics, Roman exemplary ethics bound members of the community together through shared stories, ethico-narrative motifs and moral structures. This chapter considers Roman exempla as a shared ethical resource around which a working consensus has been established within the community (a consensus which continues to be established and amended over time), which enabled communication about moral ideas between different members of the community. It argues, then, that exempla were able to deploy multiple functions within a community, which may be more or less appropriate at different stages in a person's life. Their operation will depend enormously upon who is reading them and what their situation is, but all of these functions rely to an extent on a working consensus about what the story means and how valuable it is. In the formative stages of a Roman's childhood, exempla might have played, for instance, a rather basic epistemological role, enabling a child to come to a preliminary understanding of what specific virtues were. As Romans progressed through their lives as moral beings, however, and developed more nuanced moral understanding, they could draw on exempla as a shared moral language that enabled them to discuss and explore moral ideas in more complexity, or to use exempla as cases to test precepts and definitions. Exempla were shared reference points that enabled discussion to take place at a range of different levels, from basic epistemological learning about virtues to high-level philosophical exploration (with parallels to the model of exemplarist ethics proposed by Linda Zagzebski).

Chapter 7, 'Indeterminacy of Exempla: Interpretation, Motivation and Improvisation', shows how within this pragmatic working consensus there was always a level of indeterminacy of meaning, and that this was especially