

EXEMPLARY ETHICS IN ANCIENT ROME

This ground-breaking study conveys the thrill and moral power of the ancient Roman story-world and its ancestral tales of bloody heroism. Its account of ‘exemplary ethics’ explores how and what Romans learnt from these moral exempla, arguing that they disseminated widely not only core values such as courage and loyalty, but also key ethical debates and controversies which are still relevant for us today. Exemplary ethics encouraged controversial thinking, creative imitation and a critical perspective on moral issues, and it plays an important role in Western philosophical thought. The model of exemplary ethics developed here is based on a comprehensive survey of Latin literature, and its innovative approach also synthesises methodologies from disciplines such as contemporary philosophy, educational theory and cultural memory studies. It offers a new and robust framework for the study of Roman exempla that will also be valuable for the study of moral exempla in other settings.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Back in 1994, when I was embarking on my postgraduate studies in Cambridge and expressed an interest in studying heroic women in ancient Rome, my then supervisor Philip Hardie took down from a shelf in the Classics Faculty Library an old brown book falling apart at the spine and handed it to me, saying he thought I might find something interesting in its pages. The book was Kempf's 1888 Teubner edition of Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* (then the only edition available of the work), and this turned out, though I didn't know it then, to be a defining moment for my career as a Classicist. Lured in by these extraordinary, entertaining and often perplexing tales, and the alien moral world they seemed to open up for me, I went on to spend several years working on a PhD thesis on gender and exemplarity in the work of Valerius Maximus. But before I got stuck into writing about the text itself, I spent much of my first year of doctoral studies reading and reading, as one does, in an ultimately fruitless quest to get to grips with the broader subject of moral exempla as an educational and ethical resource. I wanted to know: How did they work? How was one expected to learn from them? How did they inculcate moral principles or encourage certain types of behaviour?

I found nothing written on this subject in relation to the exempla of ancient Rome; scholarship within Classics tended then to be limited to describing the function of exempla within ancient rhetoric, as a means of illustrating or enlivening argument. I was able to find, however, some interesting studies from other disciplines, which did begin to consider the moral function of exempla in later periods: Peter von Moos' analysis of the deployment of *exempla* in John of Salisbury's twelfth-century ethical treatise *Policraticus*, Karlheinz Stierle's discussion of the relationship between history and exempla, Timothy Hampton on the rhetoric of exemplarity in Renaissance literature, and Larry Scanlon on medieval

exempla, and best of all John Lyons' rather literary study of exempla in Early Modern literature.¹ What was notable about these studies from my perspective, however, is that they all implicitly, if not explicitly, characterised Roman exemplarity as prescriptive, uncritical and doctrinaire, in contrast to the authors, genres and periods that were the subjects of their own study. Their descriptions of the emergence of critical, sophisticated recognition of the problems of exemplarity – whether by Erasmus, Boccaccio, Cervantes, Montaigne or Derrida – rested on an implicit reference to former periods of exemplary dogmatism (often lumping together Roman and medieval uses of exempla). Every Renaissance or Enlightenment 'crisis of exemplarity', when new modes of critical thinking and the emergence of the autonomous subject rendered exempla newly problematic or even redundant, supposed a preceding period when there was no crisis, but merely complacent conformity to exemplary discourses. Scanlon describes the exemplum as 'a form particularly suited to indoctrination' (Scanlon 1994: 33). Years later, in an insightful discussion of such tendencies in the scholarship, J. Allan Mitchell, writing in defence of medieval exemplarity, noted that the term exemplum 'has become a term of invective in so much criticism'. In the minds of many scholars, 'exempla simply circulate past prejudices'.²

Yet it was clear to me, as I progressed in my doctoral research, that Roman exemplarity was as rich, stimulating and *critical* as the deployment of exempla that were described in the Early Modern and Enlightenment periods. Erasmus may have been acclaimed by Lyons as 'explosively inventive' because he expressed awareness that the same exemplum can be interpreted in many different ways depending on the context in which it is set (Lyons 1989: 18), but such awareness had already been expressed by Latin writers of the first century CE. The Romans also expressed awareness that the relevance of exempla changed over time, and might be radically disrupted by radical social and political change; that the equivalence between past and present was fragile and problematic; that political and social change rendered old exempla redundant; that it was impossible to live up to one's models; that exemplarity was doomed to failure; that there was an irresolvable tension between the conformity and the exceptionality that exemplarity demanded. All these anxieties and many more that were

¹ Stierle 1970, van Moos 1984 (with very belated thanks for Robert Travers for drawing my attention to this article back in 1995!), Lyons 1989, Hampton 1990, Scanlon 1994.

² Mitchell 2004: 9.

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the focus of discussion in later periods were to be found in the Latin literature, as well.

My PhD did little more than scratch the surface when it came to answering my questions about how exempla work within a moral system, how one learns from them, and why imitation of exempla need not lead to loss of independence or individuality. But in the intervening years, as I concentrated on other projects, these questions continued to bubble away at the back of my mind, and years later I took up this project again, determined to address them more convincingly. I have now taken the time to delve more deeply into areas of scholarship outside my own discipline that seem to me to have a bearing on the study of Roman exempla; these include philosophy, cultural memory, folklore studies, psychology and educational theory. All this has taken time, and I could not have researched and written this book without substantial periods of research leave supported by the University of Exeter and by the AHRC. I also benefited immensely from spending time at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2014–5 as the Joan Palevsky Visiting Professor in Classics, where I had the luxury of teaching a graduate seminar in Exempla and Ethics that allowed me to explore the topic with a fantastic group of graduate students. That year spent in Los Angeles with my family was a wonderful boost in all sorts of ways: the sunshine, sea and mountains, the farmers' markets of Santa Monica, and the warmth of the welcome from the Classics department at UCLA. Special thanks to Francesca Martelli, Alex Purves, Amy Richlin and their families, and the other friends we all made there.

In the first years of research, as I began to probe the philosophical aspects of exempla, the encouragement of Hannah Dawson was invaluable; she insisted that I read Aristotle, persuaded me that my ideas about Roman exemplarity were relevant to the wider philosophical tradition, and was willing to spend hours in intense discussion on the fringes of family parties, helping me scribble out ideas on scraps of paper. Many of the key ideas in this book were forged during these conversations. I am also very grateful to Adrian Haddock for many stimulating and delightful (sometimes dizzying) conversations about examples and moral reasoning and for bibliographical recommendations, to Chris Gill for helping me to articulate how Roman exemplarity fits with ancient philosophical ideas, and to Ed Skidelsky for thought-provoking discussions about role-models ancient and modern. It has been extremely enlightening for me to think about Roman exempla within the context of modern social psychology and role modeling, and I am very grateful for Kim Peters for many conversations

about role models as we collaborated on the *Heroes and Leaders* project at Exeter, and for directing me to relevant bibliography in social psychology. I learnt a lot, too, from the *Heroes and Leaders: exemplarity and identity* workshop we co-organised at the University of Exeter in March 2013, which brought together colleagues from a wide range of disciplines (including philosophy, theology, history, modern languages, film studies, psychology and management studies) for a productive interdisciplinary conversation, and made it clear just how widely relevant the patterns of ancient exemplarity were.

Since I began to work in this field, studies of Roman exempla and exemplarity in general have burgeoned, and they continue to do so. The conference *Exemplarity/Singularity* organised by Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann in Chicago in 2012 was a turning point for me; there for the first time I found myself in the congenial company of people who were absorbed in exploring the same knotty philosophical issues as I had long been, as they played out in literature from antiquity to the present day. I gained a huge amount from participation in the conference and its legacy has also been vital and sustaining: Michèle has continued to be a wonderful interlocutor on all things exemplary over the years; Matthew Roller has become a regular correspondent and has kindly shared drafts of his own work on exempla with me. I am especially grateful for the friendship of Alex Dressler, who provided copious, incisive, entertaining and brilliant comments on several draft chapters of this book – bedecking them with many more ideas than I could possibly do justice to; for these, and for hours of stimulating discussion about everything under the sun, but always circling back to Latin literature, I am very grateful, as well as, crucially, for his continued intellectual support and encouragement. Indeed, writing this book has been a long and daunting process, but my motivation has been periodically revitalised and maintained by inspirational scholars – among them in particular Katharine Earnshaw, Catharine Edwards and Francesca Martelli – whose interventions have encouraged me to feel that it is all worthwhile. Moreover, for twenty years I have been lucky to work in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Exeter – sustained, entertained and buoyed up by the best community of colleagues and students that anyone could wish for. My thanks to all of them, and to the family and friends who have brought me joy and solace along the way.

I am very grateful to several other people who have particularly helped with the tricky process of *writing*. Many years of co-writing with my friend and long-term collaborator Kate Fisher have greatly improved my skills of

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argumentation; my mother Jane Rye made many interventions on final drafts of the whole manuscript to improve style and clarity; belonging to a writing group on Facebook has spurred me on (thanks to my *Writing Buddies* for the encouragement and motivation). I am especially grateful to the anonymous CUP readers who engaged so closely with both my initial proposal and the first manuscript draft and provided such detailed reports; their mixture of encouragement and criticism has ensured that this is a much better book than it might otherwise have been.

Perhaps it is the very nature of exemplarity and exempla that has meant that more than any other subject on which I have written it never seems possible to bring this study to an end. There is always another exemplum and its ethical implications to explore, always another ancient work bringing new perspectives on exemplary ethics, not to mention the continued publication of new studies by other scholars, which grapple in some way with the question of what exempla meant to the ancient Romans, a subject which has been gathering in intensity since I began my studies in this area more than twenty years ago. However, after many years of wrestling with this protean beast, I have provided, to my own satisfaction at least, a coherent and comprehensive account of what I have come to describe as ‘Roman exemplary ethics’, as a historical, philosophical, cultural, rhetorical and above all literary phenomenon. I have aimed to convey a sense of what is exciting about exempla, and I hope I have produced an enjoyable book, engaging with exemplary ethics and stories in a manner that also demonstrates the value of exemplary ethics in our own day and the enduring power and fascinating of the ancient tales. I have written the book that I would have liked to have been available to *me* when I was setting out to study Roman exempla all those years ago; I hope that it will prove valuable to others who are now embarking on the study of exempla and exemplarity in Latin literature and Roman culture, or who are studying moral exemplars in other settings.