Introduction
The Work of Examples

0.1 Why This Book?

This book is about ancient Roman examples. By "examples" I mean specific instances that people adduce as evidence when making an argument: when they say "for example…" or "take the case of…," seeking to persuade others that some proposition is or should be true. The ancient Romans were enthusiastic users of examples – *exempla,* in Latin – and above all examples set by figures from the past who were famed for performing great deeds for the benefit of the community. Such exempla were persuasive thanks to their moral authority: they provided norms for others to accept as their own and models for them to imitate. However, they could only appear morally authoritative and persuasive in light of particular beliefs about how the present relates to the past – specifically, the belief that the past is accessible, understandable, and relevant to present concerns. Exempla, therefore, are rhetorical devices that effect persuasion; they constitute a form of moral discourse; and they evince a particular historical consciousness. It is no surprise, then, that they are found pervasively in the literatures of the Roman Republic and Empire, in Greek as well as Latin texts. The built and visual environment of ancient Rome was also shaped by the concern to produce and transmit exempla. One might say that exempla are everywhere in Roman culture, and that to study Roman examples is to pursue a particular perspective or range of perspectives – rhetorical, moral, and historiographical – on the entirety of Roman culture.[1]

My aim in this book is to show how exempla work in the thought, literature, and material world of the ancient Romans, a topic I call

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[1] Ancient authors and modern scholars use the Latin word *exemplum* to refer variously to (1) the performer of a deed; (2) the deed performed; (3) a narrative or other monumental form relating or referring to a deed; and/or (4) the model or moral standard such a performer or performance sets. When my purposes require such distinctions, I use the formulations "exemplary actor," "exemplary action," "exemplary narrative," and the like.

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"Roman exemplarity." Over the past decade or two, scholars have increasingly thematized examples in their investigations of Roman authors, texts, historical or legendary figures, monuments, and social practices. Some of my own earlier studies have contributed to this field, and have been widely cited. It seems timely and useful, at this point, to synthesize the results of all these investigations, and to place them within a general framework characterizing the operation of exempla in Roman culture. To this end I examine a series of exemplary figures from Roman legend and history, seeking to describe the social, ideological, and material building blocks out of which these figures are constructed. I further investigate how they are deployed and contested in persuasive rhetoric, how they generate moral standards that are potentially binding upon others, and what forms of memory and historical consciousness they instantiate and propagate. Ultimately, I hope that students of Roman history, literature, philosophy, and culture, along with anyone who is interested in examples and their cultural ramifications, will benefit from this study of how exempla work in ancient Rome.

This book builds upon my previous investigations and publications. Elements of Roller 2004 appear in the introduction and chapters 1 and 2, 2009a in the introduction and chapter 3, 2009b and 2013 in chapter 4, 2011 in chapter 5, 2010 in chapter 7, and 2015b in the conclusion. Some of these earlier studies appeared in collected volumes, and were framed to serve those volumes' needs; also, my ideas developed over time and key frameworks are present in these earlier studies only in preliminary and piecemeal form. Yet I undertook all this work with a view toward producing, eventually, a unified, synthetic study of Roman exemplarity in which all elements would all have their proper place. I have consequently reframed, revised, expanded, and updated all previously published material to reflect developments in the field and the evolution of my thinking in the years since the original publications. The introduction, along with chapters 3 and 4, contain especially large amounts of new exposition. Chapter 6 has never been published in any form. All this material, moreover, has been organized and extensively cross-referenced to achieve, I hope, a coherent exposition following the framework I lay out in the subsequent sections of this introductory chapter.

In what follows, then, I expound a general model of Roman exemplarity. This model seeks to account for the structure, operations, and cultural implications of exempla, focusing on their rhetorical, moral, and historiographical dimensions. While this model in its full elaboration

was the endpoint of my work on this topic, it appears at the beginning of this book to provide suitable structure to the chapters that follow. In this introduction I also discuss key themes and directions in the broader scholarship on exemplarity; and I describe in greater detail the topics, contents, and arguments of the successive chapters. To adumbrate the issues at stake, however, it is helpful (and singularly appropriate) to begin with an example.

0.2   An Example of a Roman Exemplum

The historian Polybius, writing around the middle of the second century BCE, describes for Greek readership the *ethismoi* – habits or customs – that enabled the Romans to rise from a regional Italian power to the dominant power in the Mediterranean in just over fifty years. Among the customs to which he points is the aristocratic funeral (6.53–4), in which the deceased is conveyed in a cortège to the rostra. A eulogizer, normally a scion of the family, recounts to the assembled public the dead man's virtues and the deeds he performed on behalf of the community. Other family members wear masks and costumes representing distinguished ancestors of the deceased, and once the eulogizer has finished praising the newly dead, he recounts the exploits of those ancestors as well. All this pomp, says Polybius, is socially efficacious. Young men who observe this spectacle are fired with the longing to endure and risk everything for the community, in order to win for themselves the renown that derives from performing splendid deeds. Polybius then provides an example of such a performance (6.54.6–55.4):

> (54.6) Many such stories concerning many men are related by the Romans, but one notable instance will suffice for the present, offered as an example and as proof. (55.1) It is said that one Horatius Cocles was fighting against two adversaries on the opposite end of the bridge over the Tiber that lies before the city. When he saw a large force of enemy reinforcements approaching, fearing that they would force a passage and storm into the city, he turned to those behind him and shouted that they should withdraw immediately and tear down the bridge. (2) While they did as he bid and tore it down, he stood fast, receiving a large number of wounds, and checked the onslaught of the enemy, his adversaries being astounded not so much by his strength as by his resolution and boldness. (3) Upon the collapse of the bridge, the enemy was prevented from attacking and Cocles, hurling himself into the river in his armor, purposefully gave up his life, reckoning the safety of his fatherland and the renown that would accrue to him thereafter more valuable than his current existence and the portion of his

life remaining. (4) Such, it seems, is the desire and ambition regarding noble deeds that is engendered in Roman youths by their customs (*ethismoi*).[2]

Polybius explicitly says that he is citing Horatius' great deed as an example (*hypodeigma*): an instance supporting his prior general statement that living Romans are stirred to perform great deeds when they contemplate the deeds performed by past heroes, and that they pursue similar renown for themselves. In Polybius' telling, Horatius himself foresaw that his deed would garner fame (55.3), and indeed the Romans often tell his story (54.6), presumably in a laudatory vein like this one, thereby creating narrative monuments commemorating the deed. The textual record bears out Polybius' suggestion that Horatius' story was resonant. More than thirty narratives of or references to this deed can be found in surviving Roman literature, whether in Greek or Latin. Sometimes, as in Polybius, there is a full-scale narrative, while other times his name is mentioned in passing, with the expectation that the reader can supply, from his preexisting store of knowledge, whatever details of the story are pertinent to the context. Several non-literary monuments to this hero also survive or are attested, as we shall see (ch. 1). Polybius thus shows his reader the social and moral ramifications of Horatius' deed – its embeddedness within a cycle of action, evaluation, commemoration, and imitation or norm setting, a cycle that itself constitutes one of the key Roman customs of which Polybius speaks.

0.3 A General Model of Roman Exemplarity

Roman exemplarity is, I suggest, a cultural phenomenon encompassing a particular set of social practices, beliefs, values, and symbols. These are organized and linked together by the cycle of four operations just mentioned: action, evaluation, commemoration, and norm setting, proceeding

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[2] Polyb. 6.54.6–55.4: πολλὰ μὲν οὖν τοιαῦτα καὶ περὶ πολλῶν ἱστορεῖται παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις, ἓν δ᾽ ἀρκοῦν ἔσται πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἐπ᾽ ὀνόματος ῥηθὲν ὑποδείγματος καὶ πίστεως ἕνεκεν. (§55.1) Κόκλην γὰρ λέγεται τὸν Ὡράτιον ἐπικληθέντα, διαγωνιζόμενον πρὸς δύο τῶν ὑπεναντίων ἐπὶ τῷ καταντικρὺ τῆς γεφύρας πέρατι τῆς ἐπὶ τοῦ Τιβέριδος, ἣ κεῖται πρὸ τῆς πόλεως, ἐπεὶ πλῆθος ἐπιφερόμενον εἶδε τῶν βοηθούντων τοῖς πολεμίοις, δείσαντα μὴ βιασάμενοι παραπέσωσιν εἰς τὴν πόλιν, βοᾶν ἐπιστραφέντα τοῖς κατόπιν ὡς τάχος ἀναχωρήσαντας διασπᾶν τὴν γέφυραν. (2) τῶν δὲ πειθαρχησάντων, ἕως μὲν οὗτοι διέσπων, ὑπέμενε τραυμάτων πλῆθος ἀναδεχόμενος καὶ διακατέσχε τὴν ἐπιφορὰν τῶν ἐχθρῶν, οὐχ οὕτως τὴν δύναμιν ὡς τὴν ὑπόστασιν αὐτοῦ καὶ τόλμαν καταπεπληγμένων τῶν ὑπεναντίων· (3) διασπασθείσης δὲ τῆς γεφύρας, οἱ μὲν πολέμιοι τῆς ὁρμῆς ἐκωλύθησαν, ὁ δὲ Κόκλης ῥίψας ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις κατὰ προαίρεσιν μετήλλαξε τὸν βίον, περὶ πλείονος ποιησάμενος τὴν τῆς πατρίδος ἀσφάλειαν καὶ τὴν ἐσομένην μετὰ ταῦτα περὶ αὐτὸν εὔκλειαν τῆς παρούσης ζωῆς καὶ τοῦ καταλειπομένου βίου. (4) τοιαύτη τις, ὡς ἔοικε, διὰ τῶν παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς ἐθισμῶν ἐγγεννᾶται τοῖς νέοις ὁρμὴ καὶ φιλοτιμία πρὸς τὰ καλὰ τῶν ἔργων.

in approximately this order and then returning to the beginning. Toward gaining a more comprehensive and abstract understanding of this phenomenon, let us examine the four operations in greater detail.[3]

0.3.1 Action

Someone performs an action in the public eye – that is, an action witnessed by representatives of the larger community. This community consists of people who share with one another, and with the actor, a structured set of values, orientations, and beliefs. Romans ordinarily constitute the core community of witnesses, but non-Romans too, especially in military contexts, may be key witnesses to a Roman's action. In such cases, the non-Roman witnesses are presented as holding values and beliefs that overlap sufficiently with the Romans' values to allow them to judge Roman performances competently. Polybius calls these structured values *ethismoi;* in Latin texts they may be called *mos* or *mos maiorum,* "custom(s) / of the ancestors," which underscores the sanction conferred on them by past practice.[4] In Horatius' case, his action in the public eye is his solo fight on the bridge, in full view of the Roman and enemy armies on the opposite sides of the river. Polybius stresses that Horatius maintained verbal and visual contact with the Romans working to demolish the bridge, and he expressly remarks on the spectatorship of the enemy forces ("his adversaries being astounded …," 55.2).[5] Regarding the values he manifests, the enemy is astounded by his "resolution" and "boldness" (*hypostasis, tolma,* 55.2), and as readers we infer – in other texts it is clearer – that his Roman comrades agree with this judgment. In sharing a set of values with the actor, the witnesses may regard him as standing in a synecdochic relationship with themselves: the actor's performance is theirs; he or she embodies, or stands as a surrogate for, the community they represent.[6]

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[3] The following schema refines and elaborates earlier versions presented at Roller 2004: 4–6 and 2009b: 216–17.

[4] Much has been written in the past twenty years on the nature and content of the *mos* (*maiorum*), and the values associated with this term: in particular, Bettini 2011[2000]; Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 218–31; Braun 2002; the various articles in Linke/Stemmler 2000 and Braun et al. 2000; Hölkeskamp 1996: 316–20.

[5] Other sources specify that the enemy army is Etruscan; see ch. 1.1. On "spectacular" episodes in Polybius, see Davidson 1991: 11–18.

[6] Synecdoche and surrogacy: Roller 2010: 126–7, 136–7, Vigourt 2001a: 128, Feldherr 1998: 81–123, Joplin 1990: 62–8. See further chs. 2.3, 7.3.1, 7.4.

0.3.2   Evaluation

These eyewitnesses, which I call the "primary" audience, evaluate the
action's significance for their community, judging it good or bad in terms
of one or more of their shared values and thereby assigning it to one or
more moral categories. In Horatius' case, the relevant moral category is
usually martial valor – *virtus* or *fortitudo* in Latin, *aretê* in Greek – in
respect to which he is judged positively. Indeed, Polybius says that the
positive report, *eukleia,* which Horatius expects to gain among his coun-
trymen is what makes him willing to die in battle, and the enemy soldiers
too, as just noted, vouch for his resolution and boldness. In other cases,
audiences may determine (for example) that an actor displayed irrever-
ence toward the gods, judging him negatively in the category of *pietas* (ch.
3.3.4); or that she violated an agreement or contract, judging her negatively
in the category of *fides* (ch. 2.3), and so on. In its witnessing and judging,
then, the primary audience picks one particular action out of the vast flow
of human action, "marks" it as worthy of special attention, and defines
its contribution to the collective good. These judges thereby imbue the
selected action with social significance, converting it into a "deed" (*res
gesta*) with implied or explicit normative force.[7]

0.3.3   Commemoration

This deed – that is, the action, its performer, and the evaluation(s) it
received – is commemorated via one or more monuments. A monu-
ment is any sign capable of summoning the deed to recollection or creat-
ing awareness of it. Texts are an especially important monumental form
thanks to the density of information they accommodate, their special
capacity to transmit narrative, and their ability to circulate widely even
in antiquity (and of course surviving texts are the chief vehicle through
which we moderns know about Roman society). But many other media

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[7] The "gaze" in Roman literature and art has received intensive scholarly attention in recent decades.
This discussion has focused on the "erotics" of viewing, or on viewers' pleasure (e.g. Fredrick 2002).
Morally evaluative viewing, such as I describe here, has not received systematic discussion, yet is
omnipresent in Roman culture. For starting points on the moral gaze see Bartsch 2006: 191–208,
Kaster 2005: 28–65, and Solodow 1979: 252–60. It is most intensively discussed by military historians
and literary scholars who examine war narratives, as they consider how generals and other soldiers
view, evaluate, and reward individual military performances. See e.g. Lendon 1999: 310–14, Feldherr
1998: 4–19 (and *passim*), Goldsworthy 1996: 150–63, 276–79, Davidson 1991: 14–18. But the moral
gaze is not limited to military contexts.

also discharge monumental functions, and may reach much broader audiences at particular times and places than texts can: speeches or narratives in oral form, honorific statues or names, collections of spoils, commemorative inscriptions or paintings, built structures like temples or tombs or roads bearing names or other commemorative associations, toponyms or narratives attached to topographical features, wounds or scars or other bodily markings, rituals or other incorporated bodily practices, dramatic performances, and so on. Monuments include things purpose-made for specific commemorative ends, and preexisting things to which commemorative meanings come to be attached.[8] In Horatius' case, the narratives that Polybius implies Romans orally recounted to one other are monuments to his deed, as is Polybius' own narrative (further monuments to Horatius are examined in ch. 1.2). The aristocratic funeral, for its part, has a key monumental function in Polybius' account, as it commemorates the deeds by which Horatius himself was inspired. Monuments disseminate knowledge of an action and its ascribed value, transmitting that knowledge beyond the circle of eyewitnesses to people distant in space or time. People who learn of a deed by encountering a monument I call "secondary" audiences. It is through monuments, then, that a deed (i.e. an action and its evaluation) is inscribed into the structure of the *mos maiorum,* marking it as something "memorable." Actions not taken up into the witnessing-judging-monumentalizing process remain unmarked and are culturally "forgotten," as they lack a structure and context that can make them available and intelligible to people elsewhere and else*when*.[9]

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[8] My use of "monument" requires sensitivity to the word's etymological relation to *moneo,* "to warn, advise, remind" (e.g. de Vaan 2008: 387, Maltby 1991: 392). This relation supplies the primary sense of *monumentum,* "a carrier of memory, spur to recollection, *aide-mémoire*" (*TLL* s.v.; the Latin word most commonly refers to statues, tombs, temples, and texts). The connotations of imposing appearance and durability that accompany the modern concept of "monument" are not essential to the Roman *monumentum:* these features may enhance, but are not prerequisite to, an object's capacity to "remind" and "advise." The bibliography on monumentality is vast; recent scholarship helpful to this project includes certain contributions in Nora 1992 and Stein-Hölkeskamp/Hölkeskamp 2006 (all on "lieux de mémoire / Erinnerungsorte"); also Morley 2011, Lentano 2007: 147–54, Thomas 2007: 168–70, Walter 2004a: 131–79, Hölkeskamp 2003 and 1996: 302–8, Hölscher 2001: 188–207, Späth 1998: 37–41, Feldherr 1998: 21–37, Jaeger 1997: 15–29 (and *passim*), Connerton 1989: 41–104, Assmann 1988a: 12–13 (expanded in other works).

[9] Ardener 1989: 24–6 contends that events become "memorable" by being "registered" into structure as they occur. "Unregistered" actions may, of course, be retained in the individual memories of actors and observers, as long as these individuals live. The "forgetting" entailed in defacing or obliterating monuments, which alters the valence of a memory that has already been registered into structure, is a different matter, but a valuable study in its own right: e.g. Flower 2006, Roller 2010: 144–66, Hedrick 2000: 89–130, and chs. 7.4–5.

0.3.4   Norm Setting

Audiences, both primary and secondary, are enjoined to accept the deed –
now inscribed via monuments into the moral framework of the *mos
maiorum* – as normative, i.e. as having a morally prescriptive or obligatory
character. That is, the deed is taken to set or confirm a moral standard by
which audience members should judge other actions they observe in their
own time and place, or to provide a model that they themselves should
imitate or avoid.[10] Horatius, according to Polybius, exemplifies the youth
who is inspired to perform a great deed by learning during a funeral about
great deeds done in the past; thus he is imitating, or instantiating a norm
derived from, deeds commemorated in the monument he encountered
(here a funeral oration). The acceptance of a deed as providing a standard
for judging or a model for performing future actions therefore primes the
pump for a return to operations (1) and (2), performing and evaluating
actions in the public eye. Roman exemplarity's four operations are thus
both sequential and cyclical: actions are observed, evaluated, and com-
memorated, creating standards and models that inspire and shape new
actions; these are observed and evaluated in their turn, and so on, in an
endless loop of social reproduction.

0.4   Supplemental Comments on the Model

Three supplementary comments on this model seem necessary. First, the
looping character of the four operations entails that Roman exemplar-
ity always has both a retrospective and a prospective logic. Any action
in the public eye can be viewed, by the actor and/or the judging audi-
ences, both retrospectively for its relationship to earlier performances that
may have supplied it with models, and prospectively for the norms it may
supply to future actors and judges. In either case, performers and audi-
ences look beyond the current cycle of exemplary operations to cycles that

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[10] On the morally binding quality of the *mos maiorum*, see Bettini 2011[2000]: 104–7, Hölkeskamp
1996: 318–20, Assmann 1988a: 14–15. By "norm" I mean a relatively specific form of action, evaluated
within a category of moral value, that underpins a reasonably widespread belief that one "ought"
to act like this. In the moral category of "martial valor," Horatius' exemplary performance may be
regarded, depending on context, as setting the norm of "one should fight to the death" (in Polybius'
version), or "one should not shrink from fighting against greater numbers," or "one should incur
wounds in defense of the fatherland" (in versions where he survives), or "one should fight with the
aim of gaining eternal renown," and so on; Horatius' name may be associated with any such norm
when it is articulated or implied. My thinking is indebted to Flaig 2005: 209–10, 215 (borrowing
some of his language) and Haltenhoff 2005: 92–4, 99–100; 2001: 214–15; 2000: 17–19 and n. 11.

were completed in the past or that will be carried out in the future. This looking-out beyond the current cycle commonly introduces a competitive dimension to exemplary performance. Social actors, as imitators attuned to the glory and prestige of prior performances, inevitably strive to be judged not just as matching, but as surpassing, those prior performances in their chosen arena. Furthermore, as we will see, these actors and their judging audiences are usually aware of the standards and models they themselves are setting for future actors, who of course will try to equal or surpass them in turn. Competition is thus inscribed into the logic of the system, and indeed is found pervasively in Roman exemplarity.

Second, if Roman exemplarity is understood as consisting of a set of practices, beliefs, values, and symbols, organized and linked in a particular manner by the operations just detailed, then we moderns are seriously hampered by being unable to observe these social practices as they occur, or to access directly the associated beliefs and values. We have access only to the *discourse* of exemplarity, or to its *logic,* which alone survives for us to interpret – the system of interlinked visual and verbal signs, ensconced in monuments of all sorts, by which Romans represented to themselves the relevant practices, beliefs, values, and their interrelations. From these discursive elements, the otherwise unobservable practices, beliefs, and values must be reconstructed – as I seek to do in this book. Indeed, the discourse itself, consisting of signs and symbols sedimented in monuments, is part of the practice of Roman exemplarity. But since this practice cannot be observed directly as the Romans carry it out, elements of it that escape symbolic representation are now lost forever.[11]

Third, Romans across a broad social spectrum participate in exemplary thinking and action. The evidence, to be sure, is biased toward elites. Certain monumental forms, such as buildings erected from war spoils, triumphs, and honorific statues, were created only by and for elites who had access to the magistracies that entitled them to hold military commands. Literary texts too were generally written by, and tend to address the concerns and interests of, the higher social strata. Thus the exemplary figures who feature in these texts tend to be aristocrats engaged in socially exclusive activities, like (say) victorious generals. Yet this bias does not exclude other Romans. It is literary texts, for example, that furnish information

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[11] This semiotic articulation of "discourse" echoes aspects of the term's usage by Michel Foucault, Roger Chartier, and other post-structuralist theorists of culture. My own earlier discussions (Roller 2004: 4–10, 2009b: 216–17) did not distinguish carefully enough between discourse (a symbolic system) and practice or action (some dimensions of which escape symbolic expression), and the ways in which these different phenomena may be accessed.

about Siccius Dentatus, a non-elite who was among the most decorated
and celebrated of all Roman soldiers; and Iulius Caesar's war narratives
feature non-elite centurions as the principal vectors of traditional Roman
military valor.[12] Certain other monumental forms, like scars and military
decorations, commemorate the deeds of elite and non-elite actors without
distinction. Funerary monuments survive in vast quantities from non-elite
social strata, especially in the imperial age; these monuments' iconography
and inscriptions – exposing the "epigraphic habit" of non-elite Romans –
show such people engaging in exemplary thinking and behavior. Finally,
monumental forms of every sort could be interpreted by secondary wit-
nesses of any status. The import of a scar, triumph, honorific statue, and
the like was patent to everyone. And even literary texts, which might be
thought inaccessible to those of limited literacy, could be made accessible
(along with any exemplary deeds they commemorate) through recitations
and other types of performance.[13] The quantity, variety, and social acces-
sibility of monumental forms thus suggests that actors of every status took
care to submit their actions to judging audiences that were socially diverse
and thereby represented the *entire* Roman community in whose interest
these actions were performed.

0.5 Three Cultural Dimensions of Roman Exemplarity

I step back now from the particulars of the model to consider more gener-
ally the social and cultural work that exempla do in ancient Rome. First,
exempla are central to Roman argumentation and persuasion, hence can
affect how Romans actually behave. Second, they are a key component of

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[12] Siccius Dentatus: Dion. *Rom.* 10.36–8, Val. Max. 3.2.24, Plin. *Nat.* 7.101, Gell. 2.11; see ch. 1.3 on
Caesar's centurion Scaeva. Val. Max. 3.2.6 says that elites in the good old days fretted about being
outdone in valor by people beneath them in social status. On forms of cultural production and
ideologies that encompass elites and non-elites alike, see e.g. Lobur 2013: 317–19, Bell 1999: 273–6,
Hölkeskamp 1996: 303–12, and Horsfall 1996: 109–114 (and *passim*). Elite and non-elite values over-
lap, but are not identical and may cohabit uneasily: see Horsfall 1999, Alston 1998, and Lendon
1997: 237–66 on the army as a distinct society and culture; also de Libero 2002: 179–85 and Leigh
1995: 200–5 on the class and status implications of wounding.
[13] Habinek 1998: 45–59 discusses literature as vehicle for elite acculturation, but Bell 1999: 264–7
(and *passim*) discusses how oral readings of literary texts may make them available to non-elites
and even non-readers. Within literary texts, the audiences described as observing and judging an
action are often representative of the Roman people as a whole: for instance, in Livy the observers
of "spectacular" deeds are often the army in the field, the mob in the forum, or the voting tribes
and centuries at the elections. These groupings include elites and non-elites. On the social range of
exemplarity in general, Bell 2008: 14–19.