



VIEWS ON MASCULINITY

RACETTE-CAMPBELL (M.), MCMMASTER (A.) (edd.) *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World*. Pp. xviii + 313. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. Cased, £95. ISBN: 978-1-3995-2053-9.

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The number of ancient historians studying masculinity has grown in recent years. Initially, Classics scholars focused on sexuality and the types of sexual relations that ancient Greeks and Romans considered masculine (cf. C.A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality. Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* [1999]). More recently, scholars have also examined how masculinity influenced different levels of society and contributed to the self-fashioning of Roman aristocratic men (C. Goldberg, *Roman Masculinity and Politics from Republic to Empire* [2021]).

Racette-Campbell and McMaster's edited volume explores topics related not only to sexuality but also to violence, war, education and emotional display. The volume is the first to study uniformly the concept of toxic masculinity in the classical world. It includes a foreword, an introduction and nineteen articles written by Classics scholars primarily from the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

The volume addresses the paradox that qualities deemed ideal for manhood could also be harmful to other men, women and the toxically masculine men themselves. From a modern perspective it can be argued that in previous periods of history masculinity and its allegedly harmful expressions were taken for granted and used to support patriarchal societies. However, the concept of toxic masculinity is very modern. When the ancient Greeks or Romans condemned or considered certain male behaviours harmful and 'unmanly', they did not use such a term.

Additionally, when approaching the classical world from the perspective of toxic masculinity, it is important to understand that ancient views on what constituted 'toxic' male behaviour differed significantly from those recognised in the modern Western world. Racette-Campbell and McMaster aptly note in the introduction: 'our toxicity is not the same as theirs' (p. 6). This point is also emphasised in some of the articles (cf. J. Neel, pp. 95–6), while other contributors focus more on modern views of toxic masculinity and how Classics has been used to support and justify toxic versions of masculinity. Furthermore, many contributors not only define toxic masculinity (cf. J. Kenty, p. 82), but also discuss it in relation to the theory of hegemonic masculinity.

The first article, written by T.K. Husby, addresses the question whether Plutarch's punishment of his slave should be regarded as an indication of toxic masculinity. This case clearly illustrates the differences between modern Western society and ancient Graeco-Roman society in terms of social structures and what was considered 'toxic' masculinity. Husby correctly emphasises that the social status of individuals greatly influenced whether male violence was condemned and regarded as harmful in ancient society. If a person was a slave master, they could use violence towards their slave, and it was considered acceptable, even virtuous masculine behaviour, while similar acts directed at freeborn individuals were banned.

K. Passaro and B.P. Sowers's contribution examines the way in which early Christian writers of late antiquity wrote about 'pagan' rape-stories and labelled them toxic. According to this interesting analysis Christians in the Roman world were not aiming to equalise power structures, but to legitimise their own communities and gain. The authors

could also have considered whether the allegedly stricter (or divergent) Christian sexual morals had any impact on the tendency to condemn rape-stories as 'toxic'.

J.P. Evans investigates Thucydides' discussion of 'human nature' and its tendency to label toxic acts of manhood – particularly from a modern perspective – as part of being human. She explores its negative influence on the way in which men perceive themselves throughout history. D. Morassi examines Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, recognising feelings of shame as an important aspect of toxic violence. If a man feels threatened by a woman's boldness or her refusal to submit, he is emasculated and may resort to legitimate violence. Morassi stresses that, by our standards, Athenian masculinity could be recognised as toxic. However, the critique of toxic aspects of masculinity is absent in Athenian dramas composed in the fifth century BCE.

M. Masterson deals with the image of the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas and his desire for ascetic withdrawal. In his analysis Masterson shows how the emperor's behaviour turned to be harmful for the emperor himself and was based on misogynistic views, thus, it could be labelled as toxic. Kenty examines Cicero's gendered rhetoric, which she calls 'toxic weaponisation of hegemonic masculinity' (p. 84). For when Cicero describes Verres as a slave of Chelidon (a female sex worker) and Antony as the 'toy boy' of Fulvia, this is a rhetorical strategy to humiliate his opponents' masculinity. In Kenty's article the widely accepted idea that a man must control all females is recognised as toxic, and it is shown that this type of thinking has not entirely disappeared from the modern world. In her article Neel deals with suppression of grief in the Roman *exempla* of Romulus and Brutus. She underlines the difference between modern and Roman views of what is toxic male behaviour.

J.D.G. Mitchell examines Petronius' *Satyrical* and its connection with concepts of masculinity. He refers to Raewyn Connell's view of hegemonic masculinity as becoming toxic when it is achieved through the suppression and denigration of women via misogyny (p. 115). He focuses on former slaves in Petronius who, due to the stigma of their past experiences as slaves, try to assert their dominance over others.

E.A. Manwell analyses how Plutarch portrays the behaviour of Cato the Elder. She argues that in his critique of Cato Plutarch aims to demonstrate the superiority of Greek values and *disciplina* over Roman masculine performance.

S. Martorana discusses the portrayal of Achilles in Ovid's *Heroides* 3. She highlights that in this Ovidian text, when Briseis writes to Achilles, elements of hegemonic masculinity are questioned. The text suggests that fighting causes pain, while playing the lyre and making love bring delight. Martorana points out that Ovid's text indicates the existence of divergent and non-toxic masculinities in the classical world. It shows that poetry served as a medium for ancient writers to discuss alternative versions of masculinity.

R. Evans applies the concept of hypermasculinity in her analysis of Roman representations of Germanic peoples. She points out that the passages concerning the *Germani* in Caesar and Tacitus functioned as a warning to their Roman audience, reminding them of the importance of controlling harmful impulses and avoiding unrestrained violence.

K. Heydon's article examines the Trial of Sphodrias in Xenophon's *Hellenica*. It shows that Xenophon problematises the institution of Spartan pederasty since it subverts the course of justice. Thus, it is argued, Xenophon partly considers Spartan competitive masculinity as toxic.

C. Goldberg focuses on the figure of Scipio Aemilianus and his Roman reception. He argues that Scipio's interest in morals and Greek philosophical sensibilities, as well as his brutality in warfare in his later career, indicate the contestability of hegemonic masculinity.

Even though the expressions of hegemonic masculinity change and are multi-layered, they are always directed at guaranteeing the dominant position of men.

S. Agbamu examines how Classics was used to construct and support toxic masculinity in Mussolini's fascist Italy. He studies Carmine Gallone's 1937 film *Scipione l'Africano* and its use of Classics to support toxic masculinity. M. Goyette examines Senecan Stoicism and its suppression of bodily and emotional vulnerability. In the article the Stoic misogynistic argumentation is revealed and characterised as toxic. Goyette shows that its harmful impact can be recognised in modern films such as *Fight Club* (1999) and in the arguments that far-right representatives direct at those not supporting their world view.

M. Marturano examines how sexual violence directed at women is portrayed and justified in Ovidian texts. She focuses particularly on the modern term 'nice guy', which refers to chivalrous, generous and even compassionate men who expect and demand sexual rewards from grateful women. Marturano identifies this phenomenon in the works of Ovid and highlights its toxic impact on modern male behaviour and misogyny, where male violence is wrongly justified by women's denial of sex. In Ovidian rhetoric opposing females are depicted as wanting to be raped. Although the article is making an important point, it tends to generalise modern male behaviour to suggest that men in modern Western Europe are commonly inclined to legitimise sexual violence by ignoring verbal denials to have sex; this is a loaded allegation, which requires more solid sociological argumentation when discussed in an academic work.

B. Ager examines erotic curses as well as the male sexual frustration and frustrated dominance conveyed by this source material. In the gendered rhetoric targeted at women men fantasise about torture and humiliation, with one of the wishes in the spells being to drag the female victim by her hair (pp. 238–9). Interestingly, in Roman monumental art Roman soldiers are often depicted dragging subjugated barbarian females by their hair. Ager points out that one aspect that makes these curses toxic in the Roman context is that they are often addressed to freeborn women who are not supposed to be sexually available. Thus, the texts seem to question the traditional standards of hegemonic masculinity in the Classical world. In a future study it would be interesting to compare whether the curses written by females addressed to males use different gendered rhetoric.

T.H.M. Gellar-Goad compares the remarks of Todd Akin, the Republican Senate candidate for Missouri in 2012, with the views in the medical writer Soranus of Ephesus' treatise *Gynaikeia*. His analysis shows that misogynistic views on legitimate rape partly derive from antiquity and still exist in political discourse. Misinformation on biology is used to justify toxic rape culture.

In the final article J. Knight and J. Wallis take a pedagogical approach, discussing how the concept of toxic masculinity could be applied in the classroom.

The volume deservedly shows that the concept of toxic masculinity is a useful theoretical tool in studying the ancient gender system. In this attempt the book succeeds excellently; thus I highly recommend it to everyone interested in premodern masculinities. An interesting topic for future research would be to explore more closely what kinds of male activities the Greeks and Romans considered toxic, and perhaps more clearly to exclude modern views from the study. Naturally, this would mean focusing more on the differing morals of the ancient world. It would also be interesting to study thoroughly what types of behaviour ancient writers labelled as 'toxic femininity' and what this reveals about the normative gender system in the classical world.

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