

# Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome

Rebecca Langlands





## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell 2004: 9.

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

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.



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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*.

<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.marinawarner.com/home.html)

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup>

An important factor in their transformative effect was their emotional impact.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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’ (*exultat 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.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> For the role of emotion in moral decision-making in Roman exempla and in modern psychology, see Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> 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 adificque animum suum motibus pulsibusque dicebat, quam si ipse coram depugnantes eos spectaret* (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The effect of such stories on tender souls is dazzling and awe-inspiring<sup>9</sup>; learning from exempla is like ‘falling in love’ with the virtue they embody.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> For exempla as a kind of ‘wonder tale’, see further [Chapter 3](#).

<sup>9</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 120 (discussed at length in [Chapter 3](#)).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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 audiui 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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.

\*

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 Coclus – the kind of famous ancestral heroes, in other words, who are frequently reeled off by the Romans themselves as their moral inspiration.<sup>14</sup> 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 recursive-ness, 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

<sup>14</sup> 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, Curius, 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,<sup>15</sup> and looks rather like the practical enactment of Aristotle's ideal moral education.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Imitation has been especially deprecated in the light of the strong value attached in later, post-Enlightenment Western tradition to autonomy, independence and

<sup>15</sup> See also Langlands [forthcoming](#).

<sup>16</sup> A preliminary form of this argument is outlined in Langlands 2015a.

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of this, see Russell 1979.

<sup>18</sup> 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’.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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’.<sup>21</sup> It is also linked to social diversity and

<sup>19</sup> Stout 2004: 172.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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



associated with the exploration of motivation and the perspective of the interpreter. This chapter examines how different literary texts interpret the traditional and familiar story of Mucius Scaevola in different ways and so demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of the story's meaning. It argues that the ancient texts find focalisation an important interpretative tool, and often make it explicit that exempla can have different but equally valid meanings when viewed from different perspectives. An important argument in this chapter will be that the claims that ancient sources make about the hero's motivation play a most important role in guiding a reader's evaluation of the moral worth and significance of the heroic deed. Finally, this chapter suggests that this feature of Roman exempla may well be related to the skills that many Roman youths were taught to develop during their education in declamation, since probing and exploring possible motivations is a key skill used by declaimers. This chapter thereby situates these important features of the Roman exempla tradition within the context of the broader culture of Rome.

Turning to the field of cultural memory, [Chapters 8 and 9](#) propose and develop the idea of the 'site of exemplarity' as a tool for analysing the tradition surrounding each exemplum in Roman culture. This concept is then used to enhance our grasp of the embedded complexity found in exemplary tales and of its significance, and to provide further context for understanding the oscillation between consensus and indeterminacy that emerged from the previous chapters. [Chapters 8 and 9](#) draw on recent scholarship on cultural memory, and especially the work on 'remediation' by Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney and Laura Basu, in order to articulate how exempla were held as shared reference points within Roman cultural memory. They also make extended use of the comparison of the legend of Robin Hood in order to illustrate how such a site might be constituted for each member of the community. [Chapter 8](#), 'Sites of Exemplarity: Referentiality, Memory, Orality', starts from the simple problem that, in the literature that survives from ancient Rome, exempla usually appear not as a full narrative, but rather as much briefer references. This chapter proposes that the concept of the 'site of exemplarity' helps us to answer the question: To what, then, do these exemplary allusions refer? It provides a theoretical framework within which we can go on to study ancient literary references to exempla as part of a wider cultural phenomenon. [Chapter 9](#), 'The Dynamics of Cultural Memory: Forgetting, Rupture, Contestation', then explores some of the further implications of conceptualising the traditions surrounding individual exempla as sites of exemplarity within Roman cultural memory. In particular, it considers the processes of change that such sites undergo (including erasure and

forgetting) and their significance for our understanding of the wider context within which Latin authors are working.

[Chapter 10](#), ‘Changing Sites of Exemplarity: Two Case Studies’, takes two particular sites of exemplarity as case studies (that of Mucius and the less well-known case of the ‘smiling slave’ who was tortured to death by the Carthaginians) to explore how such development of sites might have worked in practice, and to consider what the specific mechanisms were by which stories were shaped and amended over time. This chapter also considers *why* these culturally charged stories changed, for instance in response to social and political change, to meet the needs of specific social groups and changing ideologies. The first case study demonstrates that even such a well-known tale as Mucius’ story is contested, and does not remain stable as a field of reference for Latin authors over the period from the age of Cicero to the end of the first century CE, but undergoes significant changes in response to a range of shifting factors. The second case study is the story of the anonymous slave who killed the Carthaginian leader Hasdrubal in 221 BCE, a tale that only crystallised into exemplary form in the first century (our earliest source is Valerius Maximus in about 30 CE). It provides further illustration of the way that exempla are formed through recycling cultural scenarios and motifs, but also powerful proof that exemplarity was not in decline in the first century, but was still drawing historical material into its orbit. This chapter endeavours to suggest some possible answers to the question of why sites of exemplarity change, drawing on models from cultural memory studies and combining them with the particular features of Roman history.

Expanding on the case studies of the previous chapter, [Chapter 11](#), ‘Diachronic Overview of the Exemplary Terrain’, provides an overview of the whole exemplary terrain from mid-Republic to the end of the first century, tracing the broader changes that took place over that period. These include the translation of aristocratic family exempla into a broader community framework; the increasing social inclusiveness and diversity among exemplary figures; the growing emphasis on personal or humane virtues and also on domestic setting for virtue rather than the battlefield; the intensification of philosophical as opposed to patriotic frameworks for establishing virtue; and the anxiety about the destruction of a functional communal exemplary system that is expressed by writers of the post-Domitianic period. However, this chapter also challenges some of the existing arguments about diachronic change, especially the idea that exempla went into decline in the first century CE. It identifies persistent features of exemplary ethics that scholars have often taken as signs of change or

crisis, but which are in fact part of the exemplary framework itself, such as the expression of anxiety about a mismatch between past and present that might render exempla obsolete, or challenges to the elitism of exempla. For experienced Latinists, this chapter might provide a useful introduction to the exemplary tradition as a whole, tracing as it does the broad background against which exemplary ethics developed. It also provides wider context for the individual uses of and allusions to exempla that are found in specific ancient texts, discussed throughout the book.

Taken together, all the previous chapters seek to build an integrated approach to the study of exempla in ancient sources, and to exemplary ethics more broadly, synthesising the approaches of philosophy, psychology, folklore studies, cultural memory studies, comparative religion and literature, and educational theory. The final two chapters go on to demonstrate how this integrated approach can be fruitfully applied as literary criticism to ancient literature. Chapters 12 and 13 provide a detailed discussion of the treatment of a selection of exempla in a range of ancient texts, and delineate the literary techniques used by Roman authors to engage with the exemplary tradition and terrain.

Chapter 12, 'Controversial Thinking through Exempla', develops a claim that is central to the overall thesis of the book that exempla were fundamentally 'controversial'. That is to say their content and significance were always sufficiently contested within the tradition as to invite debate and critical reflection; it is this quality that enabled them to play a more complex role in facilitating ethical debate even at a high level. The first two sections analyse Cicero's treatment of the exemplum of T. Manlius Torquatus in *De finibus* and then Livy's use of the exemplum of Regulus in the debate between Fabius and Scipio to show how a single exemplum can be deployed as a 'pivot' within a debate and how this role is facilitated by dynamic interplay between consensus and indeterminacy. These two case studies illustrate the different ways that texts play with the inherent contestation within sites of exemplarity to different ends. The third part of the chapter moves on to look at the Regulus 'site' more broadly and demonstrates the way that the controversies surrounding his site of exemplarity promote reflection of key ethical ideas and anxieties, such as loyalty, patriotism, courage, the treatment of prisoners, physical suffering, happiness, fortune, self-belief and perseverance. The chapter concludes by showing that this site is not alone in putting such ideas into play through its controversial features – this kind of stimulating controversy is a characteristic feature of Roman exempla, and is the key to facilitating ethical debate and reflection.

Finally, [Chapter 13](#), ‘Literary and Philosophical Adventures in the Exemplary Terrain’, takes a holistic view of a selection of these contested heterogeneous sites of exemplarity (taking as case studies those of Torquatus, Horatius, Fabius Maximus and Regulus again) across different literary treatments throughout Latin literature (or ‘remediations’). It further explores the literary strategies employed by ancient writers to maximise the ethical potential of these exemplary stories. These include, among other techniques, organisation of narrative structure, textual echoes, focalisation, dissenting voices, the dramatisation of different moral judgments and moral positions, as well as staged debates. It aims to show how individual authors engaged creatively with the wider *exempla* terrain, and the value for Latin scholars of appreciating this cultural context within which our authors were writing.

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Throughout the book, the arguments draw on close readings of ancient works of literature, often informed by comparative material or models from philosophy, education or folklore studies. Some chapters of this book are primarily devoted to sustained close readings of ancient literature ([Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13](#) and [14](#)); others focus on the development of interpretative frameworks that underpin the analysis ([Chapters 2, 3, 8, 9](#) and [11](#)). My aim is to establish a robust foundation for future research in this area by delineating the parameters and key characteristics of Roman exemplary ethics. No single book could ever hope to exhaust the topic (in particular, I have said very little here about negative examples, and I have not addressed in detail issues of gender within exemplary structures), nor do justice to every corner of Roman exemplarity or every exemplary tale. Even within the chronological limits that I have imposed (roughly one hundred and fifty years to the end of the first century CE) the range of exemplary tales that one might discuss and of the relevant ancient texts in which we find them is vast. For the sake of clarity of argument, I have been very selective about what is included, using analysis of the ancient material to elucidate and support my arguments, rather than to provide comprehensive coverage of *exempla* and the texts in which they appear (were this even possible). The classical authors whose treatments of *exempla* are discussed in most detail here are Cicero, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Seneca the Younger and Silius Italicus. There are many other works of Latin literature which get scant attention here, but merit serious study (not least the poems of Propertius, Horace, Ovid and Virgil), as does the question of why so few representations of or allusions to Roman *exempla*

are to be found in Roman figurative art.<sup>22</sup> My hope is that this book will provide a useful context and foundation for the further study of ancient exempla, and that the framework and approaches established here will prove valuable to other scholars in their study of exempla from other texts and periods. Since I hope this study will be of interest to non-classicists in relevant fields such as philosophy, literature, education, history, folklore studies and media studies, all the Latin and Greek in the book is translated, and I have endeavoured to provide an accessible introduction to each of the ancient authors, works of literature, and historical events that are discussed here.

In sum, the argument of this book is that Roman exemplary ethics from the first century BCE to the end of the first century CE facilitated the development of a distinctive way of seeing – exemplary wisdom – that allowed one to belong to the community while still retaining moral agency and individuality.<sup>23</sup> It is especially important to this conceptualisation of Roman exemplary ethics that this critical faculty is a key constituent. My account of Roman exemplary ethics demonstrates that it was a functional, coherent and nuanced ethics based on particular historical examples that, as a lived and pervasive cultural practice, may well also have played a formative role in the development of philosophical ideas in the Roman world, especially within Stoicism. Partly because it has been characterised by later thinkers (such as Montaigne) as doctrinaire, morally simplistic and monolithic, the sophistication, significance and influence of Roman exemplary ethics has never been sufficiently recognised.<sup>24</sup> This book is designed to remedy that situation.

<sup>22</sup> Some useful preliminary reflections are found in Newby 2016, especially 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> See also Langlands 2015a for a preliminary outline of this argument, and how Roman exemplary ethics might relate to Aristotelian ethics and to the development of philosophical schools in Rome.

<sup>24</sup> Such characterisations are implicit in the way that post-Classical authors and the scholars who work on them contrast their approaches to exempla to what went before in antiquity. See e.g. Karlheinz Stierle implicitly contrasting Boccaccio's critique of exemplarity through the 'confrontation of exemplarity and contingency' with Valerius Maximus (Stierle 1998: 581–582); François Rigolot on imitation as 'duplication' before the development of a more nuanced approach in the Renaissance (Rigolot 1998: 559) or Lyons 1989: 238–239 summarising how seventeenth-century writers defined their own free agency and irony in opposition to the perceived uncritical positivity of earlier periods, and especially ancient Rome: 'The speaker and the main character of the texts of the seventeenth-century writers reach the extreme of retreat from the publically rhetorical situation in which example flourished in antiquity. They are themselves unconvinced by the positive inductive evidence around them. The rise of irony and the appearance of the reader as free agent removed from example not only its imitative or injunctive force but even its role as embodiment of truth. No longer part of a canon of exemplary passages or figures and broken off from practical rhetorical discipline, the literary example became an enigma and even an embarrassment to which criticism is only now beginning to respond.'

## *Roman Values and the Archetypal Exemplum*

The stories that circulated as part of Roman exemplary ethics range from the legends of the early days of the republic, with Horatius Cocles holding the Sublician bridge to prevent the Etruscans swarming into Rome, to the inspiring exploits of military leaders, such as Scipio Africanus, Marcellus and Fabius Maximus during the Punic Wars, to loyal wives standing by their husbands in the troubled years of Civil War or Cato of Utica falling on his sword rather than submit to Caesarian rule. They include tales of divinely aided single combat, of the boldly transgressive murder of political agitators, of proud motherhood, of dignified poverty, of filial duty, of friendship that survives disaster, of cruel tyrants and of those who offer resistance to tyranny. Henry Wheatland Litchfield's chart of exemplary figures, drawn from a broad survey of Latin literature up to Claudian in the fourth century, includes as its main column headings the virtues of *virtus* (courage), *aequitas* (justice), *fides* (loyalty), *pietas* (sense of duty towards gods, fatherland, relations and others), *severitas* (strictness), *fortitudo* (bravery), *constantia* (perseverance), *continentia* (self-control), *paupertas* (poverty), *pudicitia* (sexual virtue), *clementia* (mercy), *moderatio* (moderation).<sup>1</sup> Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, a collection of over a thousand moral exempla, is the most significant surviving piece of ancient literature to bear witness to the range of exemplary material circulated in this way. The categories into which this author organises his exemplary material range across the human experience, from justice and loyalty, courage and endurance, military and civil discipline, friendship, generosity, humanity, mercy and gratitude, *pietas*, family affection, sexual virtue, self-control, intelligence, prudence and cunning.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Litchfield 1914 includes a useful chart of exemplary figures and the virtues they exemplify at pages 28–35; a series of similar charts highlighting the chronological spread of exemplary tales in various Augustan and Tiberian literature is found in Dueck 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See Morgan 2007a: 129–159 for a 'Map of the Ethical Landscape' based primarily on the work of Valerius Maximus and his chapter headings and material (129–153) and with a briefer comparison to other works that contain exempla.

Not every morally edifying tale from ancient Rome is an exemplum, not every memorable historical episode is rendered into the exemplary form. This [first chapter](#) introduces the key features of an exemplum: typical content, usual literary form, the values associated with them and the way they convey within themselves ‘meta-exemplary’ guidelines about the use and interpretation of exempla. Through consideration of three well-known, representative exemplary tales – of Mucius, Curtius and Valerius Corvinus – it provides a preliminary sketch of the Roman exemplum at its simplest and most archetypal. This is the form of exemplum against which all subsequent and variant exempla are to be measured, and to whose primal status they respond. Plenty of Roman exempla do not follow this pattern, but their alternative pattern is always outlined with this paradigm in mind, in recognition of its primacy. This sketch, then, will serve as a starting point for a discussion that will then gradually broaden out to convey the scope of Roman exempla as a varied body of tales evolving over time.

Certain periods of Roman republican history are particularly rich in exempla: the period surrounding the expulsion of the kings and the early days of the Republic; the 370s BCE; the Second and Third Punic wars. Later the civil war period of the end of the republic provided a rich source of exempla in the second half of the first century CE. There are also well-known stories featuring exemplary women – from the earliest period, for instance, Cloelia and Lucretia, and the villainous Tullia; these bear a special relation to the foundational exemplum in the context of the highly gendered Roman ethics. However, an archetypal Roman exemplum would be a deed of legendary heroism set in the days of the early republic, with a Roman man displaying some form of military or civic excellence.<sup>3</sup> Many such tales are related in the early books of Livy, their status as leading exempla in the first century CE is demonstrated by their taking pride of place at the head of Valerius Maximus’ chapters on the key Roman virtues: Horatius Cocles and Cornelius Cossus (3.2 on fortitude), Mucius Scaevola (3.3 on endurance), Publius Valerius Publicola (4.1 on moderation, 4.4 poverty), Manius Curius (4.3.5 on continence and abstinence) and Fabricius Luscinus (4.4.3 on poverty and 4.3.6 continence and abstinence), Brutus, Curtius and the Decii (5.6 patriotism). These early Republican figures continue to be mentioned and cited regularly in the classical centuries that follow.

<sup>3</sup> The dynamic intersection of gender and exemplarity is discussed in Langlands 2004 and 2006.



For instance, one of the best-known legends of early Rome is that of Mucius 'Lefty' Scaevola, the Roman hero who tried and failed to kill the enemy king Porsenna, and then held his right hand unflinching in the fire until he had destroyed it. This archetypal tale is also one of the best known and enduring tales of the exempla tradition, cited or alluded to in a great range of ancient literary sources – epic, historiography, declamation, oratory, epigram – and from the popular sphere to the most rarefied.<sup>4</sup> The grisly story is set in the 'legendary' period of early Roman history, shortly after the kings had been expelled from the city; this is a period for which we have no contemporary written evidence, and the stories that are told about this period often have a fabulous quality to them.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in the tradition of Roman exempla, the historical nature of the deeds that are handed down through the generations – the notion that they really happened, to a particular person at a particular time – is still vitally important, and the ancient Romans date this story precisely to the year 507 BCE. What follows is my own summary version of the story, drawing particularly on the accounts of Livy (2.12–13) and Plutarch (*Pop.* 17):

*In the earliest days of the Roman Republic, shortly after the expulsion of the kings, in the era of legend, Rome came close to being destroyed. The city was being besieged by the army of the Etruscan king Porsenna, camped on the other side of the Tiber. The siege was harsh, and the Romans knew they could not last out much longer. They were at a loss to know what to do. Only one brave man in these desperate circumstances was able to come up with a plan. He made his proposal to the senate: he would swim across the Tiber, with a dagger hidden in his clothes, infiltrate, somehow, the enemy camp, find the king Porsenna, and assassinate him. The plan was fraught with dangers and almost impossible to accomplish, but it seemed the last hope for Rome. The senate agreed and he set off on his mission. The first part of his mission went as planned. He managed successfully to infiltrate the Etruscan encampment without being stopped. There he saw a man dressed in fine robes, and, assuming that he was Porsenna, he approached the man, drew out his dagger and stabbed him to death. But he had a mistake: this was not the king himself, but one of his henchmen. Mucius was captured and brought before the King, who announced that he would torture Mucius to find out the enemy's situation. Mucius is in a dire situation, on the*

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the more extended accounts found in Livy (2.12–13) and Plutarch (*Pop.* 17), there are also references at e.g. Cic. *Parad.* 1.11, *Sest.* 48, Val. Max. 3.3.1, Ps-Vergilian *Culex* 365–366, Manilius *Astr.* 4.30–34, Sen. *Contr.* 10.2.2, Sen. *Epp.* 24, 66, 98, *Ben.* 4.27.2, 7.15.2, *Prov.* 3.4, Sil. *Pun.* 8. 386–387, Martial *Epp.* 1.10, 8.30, 10.23, and Florus 1.4.4–6. Among the Greek authors we find versions of or references to the story in Cassius Dio 45.32.3, 46.19.8; 53.8.3; 63.13.2; Plutarch *Pop.* 17, *Par. Min.* 305d–306a; Dion. Hal. 5.25–29, 35. The diversity of the sources and their various representations and interpretations of Mucius' story will be explored in the following chapters.

<sup>5</sup> On this body of tales from early Roman history, see Fox 1996, Wiseman 1995, Wiseman 1998.



*point of being tortured and killed. More to the point, he has failed in his mission to kill Porsenna, and he knows that he represented the last hope of the Roman people and that all is lost without him. Even if he resists torture and hides the fact that Rome is close to surrender or death from starvation, he will not improve their lot. Yet he still has reserves of courage and ingenuity. Boldly confronting Porsenna he tells him proudly: "I am a Roman citizen. Do what you like with me, but I warn you that there are three hundred men just like me waiting back in Rome, and one by one we will send them out to kill you. You will never know when the next one is coming, and eventually one of us will manage to assassinate you." This is a lie, of course, but a strategic one. Then he says: "We Romans are tough, there is no point in trying to torture me." And to prove his point he holds his hand in the fire burning on the hearth where Porsenna is conducting his sacrifice, and keeps it there, unflinching, until it has burned away completely. At this display of physical courage and endurance Porsenna is overwhelmed, and he intervenes to pull Mucius away from the fire. And so impressed is he by Mucius' valour and the tale of many men like him back in Rome, that he decides that this is a city with which he would like to negotiate, and he goes on to draw up a treaty with Rome: the siege is lifted.*

Mucius' bold though unsuccessful secret mission to kill Porsenna, and his refusal to crumble in the face of capture by the enemy, and above all, his defiant self-mutilation, add up to a truly heroic and extraordinary adventure, in which Mucius displays courage, patriotic loyalty, tactical prowess, exceptional powers of physical endurance, ability to keep cool and improvise in the heat of the moment, as well as tenacity of purpose. It is one thing to conceive and attempt the assassination of Porsenna, but to persevere and swiftly to develop new tactics after one has fallen into the enemies' hands is quite another. Even more poignantly, it is one thing to make that decision to burn one's hand as a signal of Roman endurance and resistance; to actually hold it in the flames, and to hold it there – defiantly and without yielding to the pain – until the hand is completely burned away, is a feat that almost defies comprehension and belief. This is a story that deserves to be told, that captures the imagination. As a complex and gripping narrative with twists and turns that tests its hero to the utmost, it possesses all the elements for the plot of a modern action film. For the ancient Romans, however, this story was more than just a good yarn. It was part of the foundation of Roman moral education, and Romans took the moral education of the young very seriously.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For recent work on Roman moral education and its cultural role see Bernstein 2013, and on the role of exempla within moral education see Goldschmidt 2013, especially chapter 5; see also Walter 2004: 42–50. The moral aspects of education tend not to occupy the same central space in contemporary education theory and practice in the UK, and indeed there is a suspicion about 'moralistic'

Our earliest reference to the story may be a fragment from a history of Rome from the mid-second century BCE written by Lucius Cassius Hemina, cited in a speech of Cicero.<sup>7</sup> Two hundred and fifty years later, in 91 CE, it seems that the story was staged in the arena as part of Domitian's opening spectacular for the new Colosseum, as entertainment for the masses, suggesting that in the Flavian era the story was iconic and expected to be instantly recognisable to the vast auditorium of spectators from all levels of society (and from all over the Roman empire).<sup>8</sup> This provides an indication of the social range of exempla more generally, as well as the chronological range: these stories belonged to the population of Rome as a whole, not just to the narrowly defined educated elite and the leading families, and were shared across all levels of Roman society; yet at the same time, they were used in philosophical tracts as case studies for deliberation about philosophical issues (in Mucius' case, especially around the moral dimensions of pain and endurance).<sup>9</sup> Perhaps directly as a result of Stoic uses of Mucius' story, it was also incorporated, along with other Roman exempla, into the early tradition surrounding Christian martyrdom, as a parallel, or contrast to, or precedent for, Christian tales.<sup>10</sup>

The range of different sources in which this story of Mucius Scaevola makes an appearance will render it a useful focus throughout this book for extended discussion of the central features of Roman exemplary ethics. A sustained focus on this exemplum across a number of chapters will enable us to see how a single story is cast in many different forms across the sources, signifies many different things in different contexts, and is used to think about a variety of different issues – all the time retaining its nature as an exemplum. In this chapter, however, we begin by examining Mucius as an archetypal exemplary hero, whose inspirational tale is associated with the core virtues of endurance, courage and patriotism.<sup>11</sup> Alongside the exemplum of Mucius, this chapter will focus on two further exempla –

education; one research group currently trying to counter this is the Jubilee Centre based in Birmingham which researches character education and attempting to reintroduce moral education into schools in the UK.

<sup>7</sup> Cornell 2013, F20; Peter 1906 F 16.

<sup>8</sup> Martial *Epp.* 1.10, 8.30, 10.23, with Coleman 1990: 60–61 on this spectacle as one of the 'fatal charades', Fitzgerald 2007: 59–66 and Feldherr 2010: 176.

<sup>9</sup> Along with figures such as Regulus, Fabricius and later Cato the Younger. See Cic. *Parad.* 2 and especially Sen. *Epp.* 24, 66, 98, *Ben.* 4.27.2, 7.15.2, *Prov.* 3.4 with Inwood 2007: 179–180, Edwards 2007: 87–90, 94; Edwards 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Tert. *Mart.* 4, *Apol.* 50, *De anima* 58, August. *Civ. Dei.* 4.20, 5.14, Minucius Felix 37 with Carlson 1948.

<sup>11</sup> In the following chapter, we will see that it also illustrates and explores less virtuous, more competence-related ethical qualities such as trickery and resourcefulness.

the heroic tales of Valerius Corvinus (dated to 349 BCE) and Marcus Curtius (369 BCE). The passages in which these latter stories are narrated (taken from the works of Livy, Valerius Maximus and Aulus Gellius) also serve to illustrate the typical literary form taken by the exemplum in ancient literature, and provide a useful introduction to some common textual features of exempla (narrative simplicity and concision, typical length and structure, and the importance of the interpretative frame), and typical content (the very specific dates and locations attributed to the heroic deeds, the attention that is drawn to the process of commemoration through which the stories have been handed down, the presence of iconic visual details and the recurrent role of an internal audience who models response to the deed). Having established these common formal characteristics of the archetypal exemplum, the chapter will go on to outline the central elements of an exemplum that together generate its ethical value (the hero, the story and the moral), explore how these three exemplary tales key into the range of moral values that lie at the heart of Roman exemplary ethics, and examine some inherent tensions, in particular, the relationship between the exceptional and the normative, the individual and the community.

Mucius' story is that of a brave man who volunteers for a dangerous lone mission against the enemy to save his city, and who wins his family the honorific title 'Scaevola' in recognition of the sacrifice of his hand. Similarly the tale of Valerius 'Corvinus' is the story of how in 349 BCE a bold volunteer for single combat against a menacing Gaul won his family the honorific title 'Raven-man' (or 'Raven', Corvus) because of the divine aid given to him by a raven.<sup>12</sup> One of the fullest accounts of this latter tale is that offered by Livy (7.26), but further on I relate verbatim the account given by Aulus Gellius in the second century CE, since Gellius' version nicely conveys a sense of the length, form, structure, tone and relative narrative simplicity of a typical literary exemplum.<sup>13</sup> Gellius' account is also typical in explicitly locating the story within the framework of Roman cultural memory and commemorative practices. Commemorating the episode five hundred years after it is supposed to have taken place, Gellius draws attention to its status as a centuries-old traditional tale, recorded in the annals of ancient Rome and handed down through

<sup>12</sup> Livy usually calls him 'Corvus', except in two places later in the work where he is called 'Corvinus' (32.15, 40.3); see Oakley 1998: 239 for the implications of this, which may be a tribute to Livy's contemporary Messala Corvinus.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the aforementioned texts, the story is referred to at Varro *LL* 6.148–150; Livy 7.6.1–6; Ovid *Fast.* 1.602; Dion. Hal. 14.11.201–203; Sil. *Pun.* 5.78–80; Florus 1.18; Dio Cass. fr. 30.2.

historical tradition. He frames his narrative by opening and closing with explicit references to the media by which it has been transmitted down the centuries. These include: the leading literary works of Roman history; the visual monuments of the city of Rome; and the commemoration of the tale in the *cognomen* of the Valerii Corvini family. All these details of the story's preservation in media that can be accessed in Gellius' own day serve to emphasise the idea that this story has been handed down through an unbroken chain of transmission from the fourth century BCE.<sup>14</sup>

Aulus Gellius introduces the story by emphasising the consensus surrounding the story's content and significance:<sup>15</sup> 'Of the story of Valerius Maximus, who was called "Corvinus" (Raven-man) on account of the help and defence given to him by a raven, there is hardly a single one of the most highly regarded historians who has given a variant version' (*de Maximo Valerio, qui Corvinus appellatus est ob auxilium propugnationemque corvi alitis, haut quisquam est nobilium scriptorum, qui secus dixerit*, Gell. NA 9.II.I). He goes on:

This truly awe-inspiring event is commemorated in the books of the annals. In the consulship of Lucius Furius and Appius Claudius, a young man from the Valerii Maximi family was appointed tribune of the soldiers. And at that time the mighty forces of the Gauls had settled in the Pomptine district, and the consuls, worried by the strength and number of the enemy, were drawing up the army in formation. Meanwhile the leader of the Gauls, a man of vast and towering height, his weapons shining with gold, advancing with huge strides, brandishing his weapon, came forward and looked around him with contempt and arrogance, despising all that he saw, and demanded that, if there was anyone in the Roman army who dared to fight with him, he should step forward and meet him. Then the tribune Valerius, while the rest of them were hesitating between fear and shame, (first obtaining permission from the consuls to fight this monstrously arrogant Gaul) stepped forward to meet him, fearlessly yet modestly. They meet, they stand facing one another, they are already engaged in combat, and there and then some sort of divine power appeared: a raven suddenly out of nowhere flies down and settles on the tribune's helmet, and from there begins to attack the face and eyes of his opponent. It was flying at the Gaul and pestering him and tearing at his hand with its claws, and obscuring his vision with its wings, and when it had had enough of savagery it flew back to the tribune's helmet. And so the tribune, with both armies watching, both relying on his own courage and defended by the bird's help, defeated the ferocious enemy leader, and killed him, and for this reason acquired the

<sup>14</sup> On the significance of the idea of the 'unbroken chain of transmission', see [Chapter 9](#).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the role of consensus, see [Chapter 6](#).

name 'Corvinus' (Raven-man). This happened four hundred and five years after the founding of Rome. The divine Augustus took care that a statue of this Corvinus should be set up in his forum. On the head of this statue, the figure of a raven is a commemoration of the event and the fight that I have just related.

ea res prorsus admiranda sic profecto est in libris annalibus memorata: adulescens tali genere editus L. Furio Claudio Appio consulibus fit tribunus militaris. atque in eo tempore copiae Gallorum ingentes agrum Pomptinum insederant, instruebanturque acies a consulibus de vi ac multitudine hostium satis agentibus. dux interea Gallorum vasta et ardua proceritate armisque auro praefulgentibus grandia ingrediens et manu telum reciprocans incedebat perque contemptum et superbiam circumspiciens despiciensque omnia venire iubet et congregi, si quis pugnare secum ex omni Romano exercitu auderet. tum Valerius tribunus ceteris inter metum pudoremque ambiguis impetrato prius a consulibus ut in Gallum tam inmaniter adrogantem pugnare sese permitterent, progreditur intrepide modesteque obviam; et congregiuntur et consistunt, et conserebantur iam manus, atque ibi vis quaedam divina fit: corvus repente improvisus advolat et super galeam tribuni insistit atque inde in adversari os atque oculos pugnare incipit; insilibat, obturbabat et unguibus manum laniabat et prospectum alis arcebat atque, ubi satis saevierat, revolabat in galeam tribuni. sic tribunus spectante utroque exercitu et sua virtute nixus et opera alitis propugnatus ducem hostium ferocissimum vicit interfecitque atque ob hanc causam cognomen habuit Corvinus. id factum est annis quadringentis quinque post Romam conditam. statuam Corvino isti divus Augustus in foro suo statuendam curavit. in eius statucae capite corvi simulacrum est rei pugnaeque, quam diximus, monimentum.

Once a fresh act of heroism playing out in the Pomptine fields, this hand-to-hand fight is now, in Gellius' day, a constitutive element of Roman history, explaining various phenomena: a statue in the Augustan Forum (inaugurated in 2 BCE), a family name, ancient Roman victory over the Gauls, and Roman pre-eminence in Italy. It is not clear whether Gellius is citing a particular canonical version of this story; his own introduction to the story conveys the sense that this version is synthesised from a general tradition rather than drawing from one particular textual source.<sup>16</sup> Here Gellius mentions multiple *scriptores nobiles* ('noble writers') and gives the impression that his is a new version generated out of the existing tradition of written history, based in the preeminent commemorative form of script

<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to the case of Manlius 'Torquatus' and his duel with another Gaulish warrior, mentioned in the Introduction, where Gellius claims to be citing the precise words of the first century BCE annalist Quadrigarius (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

literature, yet also existing separately from the written record, as his references to the non-literary media of commemoration remind us; everyone knows this well-attested tale. Gellius makes beautifully clear in his presentation of this exemplary story the way exempla are recorded in many different media that are in dialogue with one another.<sup>17</sup> The passage also highlights the significant role that annals (as official state records) and high literature play in providing authority for these sites.<sup>18</sup>

As is conventional for exempla, this exemplum is presented as a historical episode that has been recast as a morality tale, with the named heroic figure and his exploits drawn from, or at least located in, the wider historical tradition. The narrative is concise, so that it can be ingested more or less in one bite, and no extraneous details of context or description intrude on the spare and tense central narrative of the two men's encounter. Certain details, however, are not considered extraneous: precise date and location of the encounter are carefully pinpointed, and the hero's name is given, resonant with its connections to prominent contemporary Roman families. Such precision of these details is typical of the representation of exempla in literary form.<sup>19</sup> This episode is very specifically dated to 349 BCE, and this date is communicated twice in the passage, first right at the beginning as a consular date ('In the consulship of Lucius Furius and Appius Claudius'), and then towards the end of the tale, as a date calculated from the founding of the city: *id factum est annis quadrigentis quinque post Romam conditam*. The location of the duel is specified as the Pomptine Fields, important agricultural lands on the coast southeast of Rome. The family name of the hero is given here as Valerius Maximus.

This little episode, so nicely positioned here in Roman space and time, also contains, like most Roman exemplary tales, a visually evocative and memorable feature that can be preserved in tradition both textually and visually as an aide-memoire; in this case it is the raven that takes on this role, evoked by the very cognomen of the hero.<sup>20</sup> This freeze-frame moment is emphasised in Gellius' account by the sudden shift to the present tense, which marks the moment when the raven alights on the tribune's helmet (*corvus repente inprovisus advolat*). This vivid motif has, as

<sup>17</sup> On the way these work together over time to generate a 'site of exemplarity', see [Chapter 8](#).

<sup>18</sup> On the important role of monuments and material culture for the transmission of exemplary stories, see Hölkeskamp 1996: 305–308; Walter 2004; Roller 2004; Blom 2010: 15, listing for instance coins, buildings and monuments, as well as rituals such as funeral processions.

<sup>19</sup> Although, as well shall see, these specific places and times and names can often alter dramatically between different versions; for more on the significance of the surprising fluidity of these key details, see [Chapters 9 and 10](#).

<sup>20</sup> On the memorable visual element as a key feature of Roman exemplary tales, see Roller 2004.

the passage relays, subsequently been incorporated into a famous monument to the story, *statuam Corvino isti divus Augustus in foro suo statuendam curavit. in eius statuæ capite corvi simulacrum est rei pugnaeque, quam diximus, monimentum* ('The divine Augustus took care that a statue of this Corvinus should be set up in his forum. On the head of this statue the figure of a raven is a commemoration of the event and the fight that I have just related,' Gell. *NA* 9.11.10).<sup>21</sup> The story also contains, as many exemplary tales do, a specified internal audience who watch and admire the deed, and whose admiration is implicitly understood to be the basis of the deed's commemoration. Such an audience both models the desired response of later readers and audiences of the tale, and also conveys the logic of the tale's commemoration by providing the original witnesses to the deed. Here the spectators who stand around to watch are described with the phrase *spectante utroque exercitu* ('with both armies watching'), and this motif of spectators on either side is a common element of exemplary deeds, where both friend and foe appreciate the heroism in their different ways.<sup>22</sup>

My next archetypal exemplum is that of Marcus Curtius' plunge into the chasm. A colourful account of the episode is provided by Livy at the end of the first century BCE as part of his narrative account of early Roman history, while in Valerius Maximus, writing in the 30s CE, we find a more compact version – as is characteristic of each author. The two versions are, however, of a roughly similar length and weight, and, as we shall see, both passages share features with the Corvinus story as it is relayed by Gellius, further illustrating the shared formal characteristics of Roman exempla as they appear in Latin literature. The following analysis will also convey the ethical values with which such exempla are typically associated and the ethical issues and tensions that they typically raise.

Livy introduces the episode with the phrase 'in that year' (*eo anno*), again situating the story precisely within his chronological account of the early Roman republic. The year is 362:

In that same year, whether because of an earthquake or some other force, the middle of the forum collapsed to a huge depth with an enormous chasm. And this chasm could not be filled by earth, which everybody brought, until, at the warning of the gods, they began to ask what it was that was the greatest source of strength for the Roman people, for the soothsayers announced that

<sup>21</sup> See also Livy 7.26.1–10; Dion. Hal. 15.1.1–4; Zon. 7.25.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.35 where the armies of Vitellius and Otho respond very differently to the prowess of the German fighters; see Chaplin 2000: 50–72, Roller 2004 and Pasco-Pranger 2015: 304 on spectators and their judgment as part of the process of generating exempla; cf. Leigh 1997 on spectacle and exemplum in Lucan, Feldherr 1998 on spectacle and exemplum in Livy.