

BOOK REVIEW

Virtus Romana: Politics and Morality in the Roman Historians. By CATALINA BALMACEDA. Studies in the History of Greece and Rome. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 297. Hardback, \$45.00. ISBN: 9781469635125.

Virtus is not an easy word to translate. There is a temptation to simply render it as virtue, and thus strip it of its ancient connotations and behavioural expectations. It could appear as the epitome of manliness and courage in theatres of war. It could be an ideal, measured through a deep reverence for the past, and mitigated by a loathing for the present. It could also become a political yardstick, an arbiter of political fortitude.¹ Writing in 1914, Henry Litchfield provided a still useful list of virtues to be found in Roman writings, such as *iustitia, fides, pietas erga deos, constantia* and *clementia*.² These can be interpreted as crucial, formative aspects of *mos maiorum*. In Cicero's *Philippics* he saw virtue as ancestral heritage, passed down through the generations to those he was speaking to: *hanc retinete, quaeso, Quirites, quam vobis tamquam hereditatem maiores vestri reliquerunt*.³ Everything else could be broken and lost; but never virtue, that had allowed the Roman people to conquer Italy, Carthage and Numantia: *alia omnia falsa, incerta sunt, caduca, mobilia: virtus est una altissimis defixa radicibus, quae numquam vi ulla labefactari potest, numquam demoveri loco*.⁴ Bound to the construction of Roman identity, it can be easy to see in Roman *virtus* a catch-all

¹ See for instance I. Gildenhard & Cristiano Vigiotti, eds. *Roman Frugality: Modes of Moderation from the Archaic Age to the Early Empire and Beyond*. Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); M. McDonnell, *Roman Manliness. Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) & W. Eisenhut, *Virtus Romana: Ihre Stellung im römische Wertsystem*. (Munich: Wilhem, Fink Verlag, 1973).

² H. Litchfield, "National Exempla Virtutis in Roman Literature," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 25 (1914), 1-71.

³ Cicero, *Philippics*, 4.13: "Hold fast to it, I beg you men of Rome, as a heritage that your ancestors bequeathed to you."

⁴ "All else is false and doubtful, ephemeral and inconstant, only virtue stands firmly fixed with its very deep roots, which no violence can ever shake or ever shift from its place."

claim to superiority, part of a wider dissimulation found in ethnographic writings. It is also easy to fall into narrow discussions of semantics and etymology, ignoring the political realities and the complex relationship between ideals and the sources that record them. This volume by Balmaceda reveals not just the importance of studying *virtus*, but also exposes how and why Roman historiography responded to and shaped ancient concepts of virtue.

The book is divided into a detailed analysis of four writers (Sallust, Livy, Velleius Paterculus and Tacitus), with an eloquent introduction, a chapter studying *virtus*, and a focussed conclusion that provides a summary of the arguments presented. The prose throughout is clear and readable, with each chapter balancing comprehensive evaluation alongside careful, and often successful, argumentation. Balmaceda divides the book by author rather than employing a thematic structure, and although greater comparison could perhaps have been made between the writers (e.g. Livy and Tacitus), this structure allows Balmaceda to engage closely with the Roman writings. The introduction (1-13) provides a clear route into the topic, and the benefits of the study proposed, and “that analyzing and tracing the role of *virtus* in the works of the historians of this period takes us to the very heart of their appraisal of both political change and Roman identity” (2). There is a strong discussion of the links between rhetoric and historical composition and a careful appreciation of the issues in studying history, morality and historiography.⁵ In the Roman histories, virtue should not just be seen as a matter of pride in the past but instead a way to explain it, where “Romans win and conquer *because of virtus*” (9). The next chapter is still introductory but rather more substantive (14-47), and this provides an excellent foundation for the author studies that follow. Cicero becomes the guide here, and the chapter draws well upon his works and ideas, such as where he tackled virtue in his *Tusculan Disputations*: “[a]ppellata est enim ex viro virtus; viri autem propria maxime est fortitudo, cuius munera duo sunt maxima mortis dolorisque contemptio.⁶ Balmaceda compares Roman and Greek ideas (e.g. *andreia* and *aretē*), and creates a division between two predominant definitions of *virtus*, which she refers to as *virilis-virtus* (courage) and *humana-virtus* (virtue/moral excellence). This allows for a more nuanced understanding of Roman concepts, articulated perhaps through Greek ideas, but not

⁵ e.g. *delectare* (to please) and *movere* (to move).

⁶ Cic. Tusc. Disp. 2.43: “for it is from the word for ‘man’ that the word ‘virtue’ is derived; but man’s peculiar virtue is fortitude, of which there are two main functions, namely scorn of death and scorn of pain” (discussed on p. 16).

imported wholesale from Hellenistic thought, as has been argued before.⁷

The studies of the four writers are focused, persuasive and are guided by an excellent analytical framework. Sallust appears as a complex historian who alters the tropes of his literary inheritance, providing a new way of thinking about *virtus* that builds upon, but modifies, notions from the past (48-82). This chapter demonstrates the importance Sallust had in developing the moral language of Roman historiography, and explores the “disconcerting proximity between the languages of *virtus* and *vitium*” (78). Balmaceda notes that “Livy’s awareness of change contrasts with his presentation of persistent continuity” (83). For Livy, martial bravery and courage define the successes in his narrative of Roman history, where *virtus* serves the defence of *libertas* (83-128). There is however an acknowledgment of how the nature of those wars change, and in a corresponding fashion, so too the nature of *virtus*. This section makes pertinent comparison between Augustan ideas and evidence and those found within Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* (e.g. at 91, comparison with the *Res Gestae*). The chapter on Velleius Paterculus stands out, not just for the success of its argument, but rather the careful way in which his work is explored (129-156). It is easy to dismiss Velleius Paterculus’s writing as “the supreme example of servility toward power and acquiescence in the lack of freedom of speech” (129). His work is panegyric in style and to modern sensibilities almost sycophantic. However, here Balmaceda encourages us to look anew at his work and recognise the centrality of virtue in his narrative: “Velleius emphasizes that the principate had come not just to reestablish peace and order, but to bring back something very important to the Romans: *virtus*” (131). The final author to be considered is Tacitus, and as with each of the preceding chapters this is a well-argued and deeply analytical exploration of his historical works: the *Agricola* and the *Germania*, the *Histories* and the *Annals*. Balmaceda notes that “[f]or Tacitus, the fundamental change from republic to empire had, in a sense, diminished Romans’ opportunities for showing courage or moral excellence, but had not completely destroyed them” (158). The recognition of the shift in language of virtue, to reflect the contrasting ideals and practice amongst the Roman elite and their relationship to the Princeps is instructive. As Balmaceda summarises: “Virtus could be shown either externally or internally; it could be offensive, as in the republic, or defensive, as in the principate” (240).

To close, this is an important and confident exploration of *virtus*, and one that

⁷ E.g. McDonnell, *Roman Manliness. Virtus and the Roman Republic*.

validates how important the study of historiography can be to understanding the shifts in Roman politics, society and intellectual culture. In focussing on *virtus*, across these four writers, Balmaceda provides not just a defence of a source-based structure, but also demonstrates how persuasive a study of this kind can be. This book will become an essential study for anyone looking into the Roman concept of *virtus*; more than that, however, it will be an edifying exposure to the transient and shifting nature of virtue. As Tacitus reminds us *tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora*, but *[s]pes in virtute*.⁸

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⁸Tac. *Agricola*, 1.4: “the times were cruel and hostile towards virtues”; Tac. *Annales*, 2.20: “Hope is in *virtus*.”