

*The Politics of Immorality
in ancient Rome*

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Introduction

In an attack on luxury, Seneca praises the frugality of the elder Cato:

M. Cato Censorius, quem tam e republica fuit nasci quam Scipionem, alter enim cum hostibus nostris bellum, alter cum moribus gessit . . .

Marcus Cato the Censor, whose life was of as much benefit to the state as that of Scipio, for while Scipio waged war on our enemies, Cato waged war on our morals . . .

(Sen. *Ep.* 87.9)¹

Romans laid claim to a particular preeminence in the spheres of both fighting and morality. Seneca presents the activities of the guardian of morals as parallel to those of the general; each has made a vital contribution to the *res publica*. As a Stoic, Seneca was committed to the notion that the ties which bind all human beings to one another transcend those which bind the individual to any particular state, and yet for Romans there was only one *res publica*, Rome itself.² By using the traditional vocabulary of Roman moralists, by taking as examples the figures of Scipio and Cato, Seneca situated his text in a long line of Roman moralising. Seneca wrote his moral and philosophical works over two hundred years after the time of the elder Cato, who lived in the second century BCE; Cato's writings in turn referred back to the virtues of still earlier Romans, *maiores nostri* ('our ancestors').³ The highpoint of Roman moral virtue was always already situated in an idealised past.

Just as Scipio waged war on Rome's enemies, hostile peoples who

¹ Translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

² Elsewhere Seneca himself refers to the dual allegiance of the Stoic to his or her particular state and also to a commonwealth which includes all gods and all human beings (*De otio* 4). On Stoic cosmopolitanism, see Malcolm Schofield *The Stoic idea of the city* (Cambridge 1991). ³ E.g. Cato, frags. 18, 58, 144 Malcovati.

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(in theory at least) threatened the security of the *res publica*, so Cato fought the enemy within, *moribus [sc. nostris]* ('our morals'), according to Seneca's picture. While Romans fought foreigners on the margins of their empire to determine its physical boundaries, they also attacked their fellow citizens at the empire's centre, in disputes over the bounds of *Romanitas* ('Romanness') itself. As in most civil wars, allegiances in this conflict were unclear, the meanings of words contested. Roman claims to preeminence in defending morality were paradoxical; a crusade against corruption could only be seen as heroic when corruption was a serious threat. If Romans wished to claim distinction in fighting bad morals, they implicitly admitted their own preeminence in immorality.

Conceptions of immorality were central to the way elite Romans (the only ones whose views survive) thought about themselves, both as a people in relation to those who were not Romans and as individuals in relation to the state and to one another. The criticism of immorality was constructed by Romans themselves as a characteristically Roman activity; satire, a kind of poetry particularly concerned with the criticism of immorality, of transgression and excess, was regarded in antiquity as the only literary genre invented by the Romans.⁴

The project of this book is to explore the tradition of moralising which runs through so much of surviving Roman literature. My focus is the culture of the Roman elite from the time of Cicero in the mid first century BCE to the time of Tacitus in the early second century CE, though the figure of the elder Cato (who flourished a century before Cicero) hovers sternly in the background. The moralising tone of much Roman literature was found a source of edification in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but has not been so viewed in more recent decades. Scholars now tend to be embarrassed by Roman moralising, which they dismiss as rhetorical and repetitive, a curious accretion to be ignored by those in pursuit of the real matter in Roman texts. I want to argue that moralising rhetoric permeated the habits of thought of those who wrote virtually all the texts which today constitute the principal remains of Roman culture. An appreciation of the dynamics of Roman moralising rhetoric is crucial to any understanding of these texts and their context. The topic is a large one

⁴ Cf. Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.93–5.

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and my discussion does not aim to be comprehensive. This general introductory chapter is intended to set the scene for the particular studies which follow.

The moral prescriptions of Roman writers were for several centuries appropriated by western educationalists in the service of elite socialisation. Future public servants were encouraged to follow the advice dispensed by Cicero and to draw inspiration from the *exempla* set out in Livy's history.⁵ The following chapters concentrate on aspects of Roman moralistic discourse which do not so easily lend themselves to elision with current moralities. Thomas Kuhn, referring to the study of Aristotle and other early scientific thinkers, sets out succinctly the hermeneutic advantages of focusing on the alien:

When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer . . . when those passages make sense, then you may find that the more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning.⁶

The same argument can be applied to the study of cultures. By focusing on and attempting to understand apparently bizarre features of ancient Roman thought, we may find that we have acquired a new and strange perspective on what once seemed a familiar landscape.

DEFINING IMMORALITY

'Immorality' is a term for which there is no close Roman equivalent (though it conveniently suggests a number of the related notions with which this book is concerned). *Mos* (frequently in its plural form,

⁵ On the role of classical education in elite socialisation, see F.M. Turner *The Greek heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven 1981), in particular pp. 8–9 on the elision of Greek concerns with those of nineteenth-century Britain. In nineteenth-century public schools, the study of Latin and Greek regularly occupied $\frac{3}{4}$ or even $\frac{4}{5}$ of the timetable (see Jonathan Gaythorne-Hardy *The public school phenomenon* (London 1977) 137). While in the nineteenth century the literature of ancient Greece was accorded a more prestigious position in universities and grander schools, educationalists and others continued to view the stories told by Livy, for instance, and the moral outlook of Cicero as useful and improving for youthful members of Britain's governing class. Norman Vance of the University of Sussex has kindly drawn my attention to various nineteenth-century school texts which emphasise the morally improving content of Latin literature, such as G.M. Edwards ed. *Horatius and other stories. Adapted from Livy with notes and vocabulary* (London 1875) and E.St.J. Parry '*Origines Romae*', or, *tales of early Rome . . . for the use of schools* (London 1862).

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn *The essential tension* (Chicago 1977) xii.

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mores) is often used in Roman texts to designate both customs and morals. When not qualified by *maiorum* ('of our ancestors') it is fairly neutral in its associations; the *mores* against which Seneca represents Cato as crusading are implicitly bad morals. *Mores maiorum*, however, are sanctioned by their antiquity and by their Romanness. Roman texts regularly contrast the alleged constancy of *mores maiorum* with cultural and moral changes, which are thereby characterised as changes for the worse.

Roman categories rarely map straightforwardly onto modern ones. Recent studies have drawn attention to the ways in which the categories of the political and the religious, usually seen as quite separate in modern western culture, overlap in Roman discourses.⁷ The political and the moral were also overlapping categories.⁸ Issues which for many in the present day might be 'political' or 'economic' were moral ones for Roman writers, in that they linked them to the failure of individuals to control themselves. It was the weakness or perversity of individuals, their lack of self-control, on this view, which caused undesirable events. Problems could be solved only if individuals embraced virtue. Thus what now might be seen as, for instance, political problems were explained in terms of the ambition of individuals, economic ones in terms of their greed.

This 'moral' view of human behaviour has implications which are political in the broad sense of the modern term. The discourses of morality in Rome were profoundly implicated in structures of power. This relationship is one of the principal preoccupations of my book. Attacks on immorality were used by the Roman elite to exercise control over its own members and to justify its privileged position. Roman moral norms can be seen as constituting a 'cultural arbitrary' in the sense in which Pierre Bourdieu uses that term.⁹ That is to say, they were norms which were not deduced from any universal principle but which were, to a certain degree, internalised by members of the society which used them. And they were rarely subject to overt challenge, since their arbitrary nature was largely misrecognised.

⁷ See Alan Wardman *Religion and statecraft among the Romans* (London 1982), Mary Beard and Michael Crawford *Rome in the late republic* (London 1985) 25–39.

⁸ Cf. Donald Earl *The moral and political tradition of Rome* (London 1967) 11–43.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, tr. Richard Nice (London 1977). On Bourdieu's notion of the 'cultural arbitrary', see John B. Thompson *Studies in the theory of ideology* (Oxford 1984) 57.

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The vices on which this book concentrates might at first seem a rather disparate collection. The first chapter looks at adultery, the second at *mollitia* (effeminacy), the third at the association of the theatre with both sexual immorality and luxury; the fourth chapter explores Roman attacks on luxurious building, while the final chapter examines the association Romans perceived between prodigality and pleasure. All the vices discussed here can be seen as manifestations of what Roman moralists sometimes termed *incontinentia*, 'self-indulgence', 'lack of self-control' (though they by no means exhaust this category).¹⁰ As will become increasingly clear, Roman moralists did not draw a sharp distinction between sexual immorality, on the one hand, and sumptuary excesses, on the other. Again and again, *licentia* (licentiousness) and *luxuria* (luxury) are associated in narratives of the history of the Roman people and in attacks on particular individuals. The historian Sallust, for instance, speaks of the *luxuria* and *licentia* which began to infect Roman citizens in the time of Sulla (*Cat.* 11–13), while Livy, in the preface to his history, tells of the *luxus* and *libido* (luxury and lust), which new prosperity aroused in previously virtuous Romans (*1.pr.* 12). From among prominent individuals attacked for their *incontinentia*, one might select for special mention Mark Antony (to whom Cicero and other writers attribute an astonishing list of excesses) and the emperor Nero (whose self-indulgence is described in luxuriant detail by Suetonius and Tacitus).

For Romans, luxury and lust were cognate vices; those susceptible to sexual temptation, it was felt, were also prone to indulge to excess their appetites for food, drink and material possessions. Attacks on these vices were articulated in similar terms: the skirmishes between Roman moralists and alleged voluptuaries took place on the conceptual borders between masculine and feminine, public and private, Roman and alien. The parallels between the arguments adduced by Roman moralists regarding different aspects of *incontinentia* allowed these arguments to reinforce one another. The present work, in juxtaposing studies of diverse aspects of Roman immorality, could itself be seen as proceeding by somewhat similar means, though to a rather different end.

¹⁰ On *incontinentia* as a rubric in biography and encomium see A. Wallace-Hadrill *Suetonius* (London 1983) 157–8, 171–4.

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APPROACHES TO 'IMMORALITY'

The nineteenth century saw the publication of numerous works concerned with the history of morals – an interest which should perhaps be related to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant attempts to privilege morality over revelation as the essence of Christian religion.¹¹ William Lecky's work, *A history of European morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (1869), begins by referring to the 'relative importance that in different ages has been attached to different virtues' – a statement which seems to imply that the essential meaning of a particular virtue, such as chastity (whatever word is used to refer to it), remains constant through the ages, even if it is held in higher esteem at some times than at others. This unwillingness to examine the particularity of moral notions in their historical context has continued to be a feature of modern works concerned with Roman morality. More recently, Donald Earl, Andrew Lintott and others have looked at Roman accounts of decadence with the apparent purpose of plotting the progress of this alleged decline.¹² These studies, while they acknowledge the importance of the moral preoccupations of Roman writers, concern themselves with the question of whether they were right or wrong, rather than examining their concepts of moral decline. Earl, for instance, observes of Sallust that: 'his basic notion that the failure of the Roman republic was connected with a failure in the ideal of *virtus* was not without merit.'¹³

Those who have studied Roman moralising texts have usually been preoccupied with the real behaviour felt to lie behind them rather than the way the texts themselves are articulated. Luxury and sexual immorality are closely associated in the writings of Roman moralists, as I have emphasised. However, since in modern moral schemes luxury and sexual immorality are not so closely associated, scholars have tended to treat them as separate fields of study. Roman attacks on luxury have been viewed primarily as documents of the extent of

¹¹ Thereby defending Christianity from rationalist attacks on the notion of revelation. See Mary Douglas *Purity and danger* (London 1966) 25–31 for a discussion of the effects of this development on the study of magic and 'primitive' religion in the works of, for instance, Robertson Smith.

¹² For instance, Earl 1967; A.W. Lintott 'Imperial expansion and moral decline in the Roman empire' *Historia* 31 (1972) 626–38. For an earlier example of a study in a similar vein, see Henry W. Litchfield 'National *exempla virtutis* in Roman literature' *HSPH* 25 (1914) 1–71.

¹³ Earl 1967: 55

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Roman wealth. On the basis of such texts, early modern scholars of ancient Rome represented Roman luxury as both unparalleled and reprehensible.¹⁴ By the late eighteenth century, some took a more favourable view. Although Edward Gibbon traced a connection between the prosperity of the Roman empire and the gradual eclipse of freedom and genius,¹⁵ he also observed: ‘Luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property.’¹⁶ Ludwig Friedländer’s *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms* (1862) expresses a liberal approval of the economic effects of ‘luxury’ quite close to that of Gibbon.¹⁷ He criticises in previous scholars ‘the habit of assenting unreservedly to the condemnation by Roman writers of certain forms of luxury, whereas an unprejudiced examination would have shown them innocent and sensible, even welcome symptoms of advance in civilisation and prosperity.’¹⁸ The traditional view of the ancient Romans as immoral and extravagant to an unparalleled degree he attributes to the asceticism of those authors (in particular, Varro, the elder Pliny and the younger Seneca) who are the main authorities for Roman luxury. They were, he argues, mistaken.

Friedländer’s magisterial work sets out to discover from Roman discussions of immoral behaviour how Romans actually behaved. So

¹⁴ This is the view taken by e.g. Johannes Meursius’ treatise of 1605, *De luxu Romanorum* (The Hague). Similar views are to be found expressed by some scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance: C.G. Zumpt *Über den Stand der Bevölkerung und die Volksmehrung in Altertum* (Berlin 1841) 70–5. Friedländer presents this as the orthodoxy against which he argues.

¹⁵ Edward Gibbon *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire* (first full octavo edition London 1788). Pages numbers here refer to the edition of J.B. Bury (London 1909).

¹⁶ Gibbon goes on to suggest, however, that luxury became a problem when it led to an imbalance of trade between the Roman empire and other states (1909 I: 59). On Gibbon’s attitude to economic questions, see J.G.A. Pocock *Virtue, commerce and history* (Cambridge 1985) 143–56.

¹⁷ Ludwig Friedländer *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms: in der Zeit von Augustus bis zum Ausgang der Antonine* (1st edn. Königsberg 1862, 10th Stuttgart 1964, later editions ed. Georg Wissowa). There is an English translation from the seventh edition: *Roman life and manners under the early empire* tr. J.H. Freese and Leonard A. Magnus (London 1908–28). This unfortunately abridges Friedländer’s footnotes. An approach similar to that of Friedländer is adopted by Wilhelm Kroll in his study of the republic, *Die Kultur der Ciceronischen Zeit* (Leipzig 1933).

¹⁸ Friedländer 1964 II: 280 (= II: 141 in Eng. tr.). Cf. ‘Luxury in food . . . improved the standard of living and so helped to spread and promote civilisation’ (1964 II: 307 = II: 165 in Eng. tr.). As support for his argument, Friedländer points to the greater prosperity and higher degree of civilisation among northern Europeans of his day in comparison with the inhabitants of southern European countries (1964 II: 285 = II: 146 in Eng. tr.).

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that his readers may see Roman habits in perspective, he devotes a great deal of space to comparisons between the behaviour of the Roman elite and that of various European aristocracies in more recent centuries, in terms of the absolute value of the goods they purchased. Friedländer concludes that, in most respects, members of the Roman elite were relatively modest in their expenditure on luxury goods, houses and exotic foods.¹⁹ But deciding whether the term 'luxury' can reasonably be applied to the habits of the ancient Romans is not simply a question of measuring their expenditure. Rather than denying Seneca's assertions that it is luxurious to drink before dinner or to keep indoor plants (*Ep.* 122.6, 8), we might consider what lay behind these claims. What did *luxuria* mean for Roman writers?

Friedländer warns his readers against extrapolating from the behaviour attributed to Nero or Caligula the customs of the majority of the Roman elite.²⁰ However, he assumes, like many other scholars, that Roman accounts of how Nero or Caligula behaved were in themselves accurate (there are good reasons for scepticism here which will be discussed below). More recent scholars have shared Friedländer's preoccupation with the realities of Roman luxury.²¹ Recent interest in the ancient economy, for instance, has prompted some scholars to use moralising texts as a means of recovering patterns of trade and consumption in the ancient world.²² The scholar's common sense is invoked as the test for differentiating 'rhetorical exaggeration' from the 'kernel of truth' which is felt to lurk in, for instance, the elder Pliny's description of Scaurus' temporary theatre building (which will be discussed in chapter four, below).

Roman sexual morality is usually considered quite separately from discussions of luxury. While this was not a subject with which nineteenth-century scholars often concerned themselves (publicly, at any rate), some scholars of the early twentieth century, in line with the concerns of an intellectual world transformed by the work of Freud, produced psychological studies of Roman attitudes to sex, often

¹⁹ See 1964 esp. II, ch. 2. ²⁰ Friedländer 1964 II: 269 (=II: 132 in Eng. tr.)

²¹ Though a small number of studies published in the last few years have focused rather on the terms in which luxury was attacked by Roman moralists and the nature of its associations. See, for instance, Jasper Griffin *Latin poets and Roman life* (London 1985) esp. ch. 1; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill 'Pliny the elder and man's unnatural history' *G&R* 37 (1990) 80-96.

²² Filippo Coarelli, for instance, attempts to work out the cost of pillars from the figures given by the elder Pliny ('Il commercio delle opere d'arte in età tardo repubblicana' *DArch* 1 (1983) 45-53).

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suggesting links with the alleged Roman love of cruelty.²³ Over the last decade, the sexual *mores* of the ancient world have become a fashionable subject of study, partly as a result of Michel Foucault's work in this field.²⁴ Greek sexuality has a particular resonance in the context of Foucault's project²⁵ and many of these highly sophisticated recent studies have concentrated on ancient Greece.²⁶ Despite the concern of these studies with attitudes rather than real behaviour in the ancient world, they have offered relatively little exploration of the relationship between discussions of sexual immorality and those concerning other vices, areas which are intimately connected in ancient literature (as I hope to show, with respect to Latin moralising texts). David Halperin, for instance, in his book on homosexuality in ancient Greece, somewhat paradoxically observes that sexuality needs to be decentred from studies of ancient sexual experience, while apparently organising his book around precisely this topic.²⁷

RHETORIC AND REALITY

The relationship between moralising and 'social reality' is by no means so straightforward as many of those who have studied Roman moralising texts have implied. This problem is highlighted by the claims sometimes made by Roman poets. A poem of Catullus includes the following assertion:

nam castum esse decet pium poetam
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est;

²³ For instance, Otto Kiefer *Kulturgeschichte Roms unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der römischen Sitten* (Berlin 1933). For an illuminating discussion of Hans Licht's study (in a similar vein) of Greek sexual *mores*, see the introduction to D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin eds. *Before sexuality: the construction of erotic experience in the ancient Greek world* (Princeton 1990).

²⁴ For a full bibliography on this subject, see chapter two below. The second and third volumes of Foucault's *History of sexuality* are concerned with ancient Greece and the Roman empire respectively: vol. II *The use of pleasure* (London 1986); vol. III *The care of the self* (London 1988).

²⁵ See the discussion by Mark Poster, 'Foucault and the tyranny of Greece', in David Couzens Hoy ed. *Foucault: a critical reader* (Oxford 1986) 205–20.

²⁶ There have, however, been a few studies of Roman material, in particular: Paul Veyne 'La famille et l'amour à Rome sous le haut-empire romain' *Annales ESC* 33.1 (1978) (= Paul Veyne *La Société romaine* (Paris 1991) 88–130); 'Homosexuality in ancient Rome' in Philippe Ariès and André Béjin eds. *Western sexuality* (Oxford 1983) 26–35; 'The Roman empire' in Paul Veyne ed. *A history of private life* 1 (Cambridge, Mass. 1987); Amy Richlin *The garden of Priapus* (New Haven 1983).

²⁷ D.M. Halperin *One hundred years of homosexuality* (New York 1990) 38.

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qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,
si sunt molliculi et parum pudici.

For a serious poet should himself be pure but his verses need not be so. Indeed, they possess wit and charm only when a little soft and not altogether modest.

(Cat. 16.5–8)

Catullus appears to contrast the ‘immoral’ subjects of his poetry with the purity of his own life.²⁸ Assertions about the sexual behaviour of the poet and of others, too, need not be read at face value (though, in drawing attention to the unreliability of poetic texts, Catullus’ poem at the same time problematises its own status).²⁹ The sexual content of epigram (and other genres of Latin literature) can be seen as an elaborate literary game – a game in which protestations of sexual purity have their own place.³⁰

Such problems do not only apply to the interpretation of poetry. Rhetorical invective is full of assertions about the immorality, sexual and sumptuary, of prominent individuals. R.G.M. Nisbet, in his commentary on Cicero’s *In Pisonem*, points out that many of the vices of which the ex-consul Piso is accused are elsewhere attributed to Cicero himself. In Cicero’s case we are happy to dismiss these lurid allegations of adultery, gluttony, luxury and avarice as false or exaggerated. We should be equally suspicious of what Cicero himself alleges about Piso, argues Nisbet.³¹ Neither should we assume that those who listened to the speeches of Cicero and other Roman orators were persuaded of the literal truth of the claims they made about their opponents’ behaviour. Such claims functioned as vivid and highly entertaining assertions about the general character of their victims. They also served to display the orator’s mastery of the traditional vocabulary of invective.³² Rhetorical treatises emphasise the importance of *inventio*, ‘elaboration’, in all branches of the orator’s art.³³ In

²⁸ The association of the term *mollis* will be discussed in detail in chapter two. For similar protestations see Martial 1.4; 11.15 and Pliny, *Ep.* 4.14.

²⁹ For the paradoxical nature of the claim, cf. Griffin 1985: 18.

³⁰ Richlin 1983: 2–13; Duncan Kennedy *The arts of love* (Cambridge 1992).

³¹ R.G.M. Nisbet ed. *Cicero In Pisonem* (Oxford 1961) appendix 6. Cf. Richlin 1983: 96–104 and Judith P. Hallett ‘*Perusinae glandes* and the changing image of Augustus’ *AJAH* 2 (1977) 151–71.

³² Quintilian’s discussion of encomium and invective allows the orator a great deal of imaginative licence (*Inst.* 3.7).

³³ Cf. e.g. *Ad Her.* 1.2; *Cic. De inv.* 1.7.9; *Quint. Inst.* 12.10.36. See too *Quint. Inst.* 2.17.27–9, justifying the orator’s use of fictions in a good cause. Cf. Barton (forthcoming b).

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invective, this might manifest itself in the skilful deployment of innuendo (for instance, Cicero's repeated hints about an incestuous relationship between Publius Clodius and his sister)³⁴ or else in the detailed description of what might be entirely imaginary scenes.³⁵ Insults exchanged in the courtroom or on the *rostra* are profoundly unreliable as guides to the actual behaviour of their victims. But to claim they were not taken literally is not to say that they were empty or meaningless.³⁶ This kind of abuse was a major element in the arsenal deployed in the agonistic rituals of Roman political life.

Texts generally classified as 'history' are equally problematic. The assertions they contain about the morals of prominent figures are often, in Amy Richlin's words, a 'fossilised version' of contemporary political invective.³⁷ Anecdotes (such as those told by Suetonius about Roman emperors) are also untrustworthy as a guide to what really happened – though they can give fascinating insights into what was thought typical of, for instance, a tyrannical emperor. Richard Saller has drawn attention to the suspicious frequency with which similar anecdotes are told about different subjects.³⁸ Whether these incidents actually happened or not is impossible to ascertain and considerably less important (for the present discussion) than the fact that people told the stories and their reasons for doing so. Such tales were told not to give later historians an accurate picture of patterns of behaviour in ancient Rome but in the service of more urgent ends, to express hostility, contempt, envy, to make sense of the world the teller lived in.

We cannot use these texts, these fragments of a vanished and largely alien world, to reconstruct the behaviour of particular individuals or to explore personal idiosyncrasies. Yet neither can we see them as entirely independent of the material world which produced them. While it is not possible to determine the motives of individual

³⁴ Innuendos concerning Clodius: Cic. *De domo sua* 92, *De har. resp.* 9, 38, *Pro Sestio* 16–17.

³⁵ Quintilian praises Cicero's skill in describing the extraordinary luxury of Antony's slaves in order to hint at the still greater luxury of their master. 'Cicero could hardly have imagined such luxury in Antony himself' (*Inst.* 8.4.25). Quintilian, interested in the passage as evidence of Cicero's rhetorical skills, takes his exaggeration for granted.

³⁶ Cf. Jeanne Favret-Saada's anthropological study of accusations of witchcraft in the Bocage in western France (*Deadly words: witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge 1980)). She demonstrates that accusations of witchcraft are part of a complex power game in which no-one ever admits to being a witch. Indeed, it seems no-one in this society believes himself or herself to be a witch. But the accusations are nonetheless heart-felt and serious for all that.

³⁷ Richlin 1983: 86.

³⁸ Richard Saller 'Anecdotes as historical evidence for the principate' *G&R* 27 (1980) 69–83.

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Romans, even of those about whom we are best informed, such as Cicero or the younger Pliny, we can, I think, speak of the interests of a social group or sub-group. A central premise of my book is that accusations and descriptions of immorality were implicated in defining what it meant to be a member of the Roman elite, in excluding outsiders from this powerful and privileged group and in controlling insiders. This is not an idea which can be derived from any ancient text, but we cannot negotiate a relationship with the past except in terms of our own concepts. The most we can do is to acknowledge the historical specificity of those concepts. If, then, we begin by assuming the politically interested nature of Roman moralistic discourse, what sense can we make of Roman moralising texts? We cannot get any closer to the ancient Romans than to the texts we read; we need to recognise that, for us, these highly rhetorical texts are Roman reality. Rather than trying to see through them, we can choose to look at them – an enterprise which can prove entertaining as well as enlightening.

DEFINING THE ELITE

Roman moralistic discourse, I have suggested, played an important role in defining the Roman elite. Who constituted this elite? Roman social hierarchy might at first sight seem quite clear-cut: senators forming the highest class, the next highest composed of equestrians, with the rest of the citizens beneath them. But how were these classes marked off from one another? And how was relative social status determined within these orders? The following discussion refers to the upper classes of both late republic and principate, indicating where qualifications for membership of the elite were different at different times.

Members of the Roman senate and their families were by and large seen as occupying the highest level of the social hierarchy.³⁹ Senators held public office, commanded Rome's armies and governed the provinces of the empire. The number of senators at any one time varied between 300 before Sulla (who doubled it to 600, in 81 BCE), rising briefly to 1,200 under Julius Caesar, before settling at around

³⁹ Though under the principate an individual's membership of the senate became a less crucial determinant of his status, provided his father or grandfather had been a senator. On the structure of the senatorial elite under both republic and principate, see Keith Hopkins *Death and renewal* (Cambridge 1983) 31–200 (with Graham Burton).

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600 under Augustus. By the later republic, higher magistrates automatically became senators for life (though they might be expelled by the censors for particularly grievous misdemeanours). Under the republic, such magistrates gained their posts by popular election (the voting assemblies gave disproportionately great influence to the wealthy).⁴⁰ From the time of the emperor Tiberius, however, voting assemblies were reduced to rubber-stamping the selection of candidates already determined by the emperor and senate.⁴¹ Wealth was, throughout the period studied here, a prerequisite for election to high office. Under the republic, a senator needed a fortune of at least 400,000 sesterces; the emperor Augustus raised the senatorial census to 1,000,000 sesterces, thereby emphasising the distinction between the two orders. Although many senators came from families with a tradition of membership of the senate, by no means all did. Similarly, a significant number of families failed to maintain representation in the senate over the generations.⁴² Thus, although it was clear who was a senator, it was not so clear who would or should attain this prestigious position. Hence, in part, the significance of debates as to the relative importance of wealth, birth and virtue in determining a man's worth.

The equestrians made up the second order of Roman citizens. In the early Roman republic, equestrians were those who formed the cavalry of the Roman army. Later there was still an inner core of 1,800 men who were known as holders of the public horse but the nature of their role remains unclear.⁴³ Under the principate, equestrians were increasingly to be found in senior administrative posts (for instance, as financial officials or governors of minor provinces).⁴⁴ But the equestrian order is rather more difficult to define than the senatorial.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ On the voting assemblies for higher magistrates, see Claude Nicolet *The world of the citizen in republican Rome* (London 1980) 219–24, 246–67; Lily Ross Taylor *Roman voting assemblies from the Hannibalic war to the time of Caesar* (Ann Arbor 1966) 84–106.

⁴¹ On this procedure and other aspects of the functioning of the senate under the principate, see R. J. A. Talbert *The senate of imperial Rome* (Princeton 1984).

⁴² Cf. T. P. Wiseman *New men in the Roman senate, 139 BC–AD 14* (Oxford 1971); P. A. Brunt 'Nobilitas and novitas' *JRS* 72 (1982) 1–17; Hopkins 1983: 39–200.

⁴³ On this, see P. A. Brunt 'The equites in the late republic' in Robin Seager ed. *The Crisis of the Roman republic: studies in political and social history* (Cambridge 1969) 83–115 (= Brunt *The fall of the Roman republic* (Oxford 1988) 144–93) and T. P. Wiseman 'The definition of the eques Romanus in the late republic and early empire' *Historia* 19 (1970) 67–83.

⁴⁴ On this development see P. A. Brunt 'Principes and equites' *JRS* 73 (1983) 42–75.

⁴⁵ Emphasised by Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller *The Roman empire, economy, society and culture* (London 1987) 112–14.