

DANGEROUS SAILING: VALERIUS MAXIMUS AND THE SUPPRESSION OF SEXTUS POMPEIUS

Valerius Maximus dedicates his *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* to an emperor secure in his authority, ‘in whose charge the unanimous will of gods and men has placed the government of land and sea’ (*penes quem hominum deorumque consensus maris ac terrae regimen esse uoluit*, 1 *praef.*). The work goes on to chart many more precarious moments in the fortunes of the Roman people. Sometimes these coincide with awkward moments for Valerius himself. Either he is forced (and forces his readers) to confront glorious events that have an anti-imperial tinge or else his own moral stance (and ours) is challenged by encounters with extreme examples of scandalous behaviour.¹ We would hardly expect, though, to find someone so upright as Valerius feigning one kind of difficult confrontation in order to cover up another, and yet it looks as though that is exactly what he does on one occasion when he finds himself in particularly deep water.

Chapter 3.5, which follows a catalogue of men who rose in the world from humble origins, is devoted to ‘sons who were less worthy than their noble fathers’: *Qui a parentibus claris degenerauerunt*.² The Younger Scipio, the Younger Q. Fabius Maximus and the Younger Clodius, all stained in various ways, by military humiliation, extravagance or shameful sexual behaviour (*taeterrimis ignauiae ac nequitiae sordibus imbuta nobilia portenta*), are followed in a lip-smacking climax by a fourth scion of a great house, Hortensius, grandson of the orator Hortensius, who applied the family tongue once celebrated for its unswerving attention to affairs of state less palatably among the brothels of Rome:

¹ On exemplarity, especially in Valerius Maximus, see G. Maslakov, ‘Valerius Maximus and Roman historiography: a study of the *exempla* tradition’, *ANRW* II 32.1 (1984), 437–96, C. Skidmore, *Practical Ethics for Roman Gentlemen: The Work of Valerius Maximus* (Exeter, 1996), 3–27, J.D. Chaplin, *Livy’s Exemplary History* (Oxford, 2000), esp. 1–31, M.B. Roller, ‘Exemplarity in Roman culture: the cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia’, *CPh* 99 (2004), 1–56 and T. Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), 122–59. R. Langlands, ‘“Reading for the moral” in Valerius Maximus: the case of *seueritas*’, *CCJ* 54 (2008), 169–87 argues that the chief purpose of *exempla* was to promote active ethical deliberation about controversial moral issues. See W.M. Bloomer, *Valerius Maximus and the Rhetoric of the New Nobility* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 40–58, 158–229 *passim* on Valerius’ solutions to politically sensitive cases, for example a list of civil war victors that climaxes with Sulla and is ‘choked off’ before reaching the Caesars: 2.8.7 *piget taedetque per uulnera rei publicae ulterius procedere* (discussed 159–60). On Valerius’ selective ‘remembering’ of the triumphal period, see A. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge, 2005), 49–66 (55: a moral universe ‘fashioned as much by exclusion as it is by inclusion’) and H. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 109. Latin text of Valerius is taken from D.R. Shackleton Bailey’s Loeb edition (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 2001).

² On Valerius’ use of the father-son theme see U. Lucarelli, *Exemplarische Vergangenheit: Valerius Maximus und die Konstruktion des sozialen Raumes in der frühen Kaiserzeit* (Göttingen, 2007), 37–129. Skidmore (n. 1), 89 believes the purpose of chapter 3.5 is to prevent ‘more noble readers from complacently thinking that social position is a sufficient qualification for virtue’.

Nam Q. quidem Hortensii, qui in maximo et ingeniorum <excellentium> et ciuium amplissimorum prouentu summum auctoritatis atque eloquentiae gradum obtinuit, nepos Hortensius Corbio omnibus scortis abiectiorem et obsceniorem uitam exegit, ad ultimumque lingua eius tam libidini cunctorum inter lupanaria prostitit quam aui pro salute ciuium in foro excubuerat. (3.5.4)

Shocked by the picture he has conjured up, Valerius recoils into metaphor. These are dangerous waters, he says, and an immediate change of subject is needed to avoid certain shipwreck in the deepest whirlpool of turpitude:

Animaduerto in quam periculosum iter processerim; itaque me ipse reuocabo, ne si reliqua eiusdem generis naufragia consecrari perseuerauero, aliqua inutili relatione implicer. referam igitur pedem, deformesque umbras in imo gurgite turpitudinis suae iacere patiar: satius est enim narrare qui inlustres uiri in cultu ceteroque uitae ritu aliqua ex parte nouando sibi indulserint. (3.6 *praef.*)

Such a manoeuvre is perfectly comprehensible as a practical performance of exemplary behaviour,³ and Valerius moves swiftly on to his next list, of ‘distinguished men whose clothes were sometimes more relaxed than ancestral custom allowed’. A moment of relief, perhaps, but there may be another reason for the abrupt switch of direction. Oddly missing from the list in 3.5 is Roman history’s most famous degenerate son: Sextus Pompeius, ‘pirate’ son of Pompey the Great, whose modern rehabilitation has been an uphill struggle against Augustan *damnatio memoriae* and a posthumous record of almost universal contempt (Vell. 2.73.1 *fide patri dissimillimus*, Luc. 6.420 *Magno proles indigna parente*, Flor. *Epit.* 2.18.2 *o quam diuersus a patre!*).⁴ The chronological ordering of the chapter might lead one to expect that he would make his entry at exactly this point.⁵ But as Gowing has observed, Valerius never mentions Sextus anywhere in his work, not even in the section *De Pietate* (5.4–6), despite the fact that he had famously associated himself with the epithet *pious*.⁶ The obvious reason: Sextus Pompeius was also the name of Valerius’ Tiberian patron.⁷ Not surprisingly, Valerius does find room for

³ See Bloomer (n. 1), 237–8 on Valerius’ careful avoidance of obscene language (which is not the same as avoidance of innuendo); he does not discuss this passage. Langlands (n. 1), 161 claims that ‘[b]y ... presenting *exempla* as troubling, extreme or ambiguous, Valerius conveys how difficult it is to make ethical judgements’.

⁴ Energetic attempts in M. Hadas, *Sextus Pompey* (New York, 1930) and the excellent collection of essays in A. Powell and K. Welch (edd.), *Sextus Pompeius* (Swansea, 2002). Sextus as a pirate and leader of slaves: Hor. *Epod.* 4.19, Vell. 2.73.3, Liv. *per.* 123, 128, App. *BC* 5.8.67, 5.9.80, 5.9.92, Aug. *RG* 25.2 *mare pacui a praedonibus*. See Cic. *Phil.* 13.13 on the burden for Sextus of his father’s reputation, with A. Gowing, ‘Pirates, witches and slaves: the imperial afterlife of Sextus Pompeius’, in Powell and Welch, 187–211, at 204.

⁵ See Bloomer (n. 1), 29 and 32 on Valerius’ tendency to keep to chronological order within sections of chapters and to lead up to the most extreme example of each virtue or vice. Here, Hortensius’ sins intensify those of the Younger Clodius before him, which are equally euphemistically and equally suggestively relayed: 3.5.3 *auide enim abdomine deuorato foedae ac sordidae intemperantiae spiritum reddidit*.

⁶ Gowing (n. 4), 192: ‘[H]e is rigorously and, I think, deliberately excluded from Valerius’ text.’ For the contest for *pietas* between Sextus and Octavian, see A. Powell, ‘“An island amid the flame”: the strategy and imagery of Sextus Pompeius’, in Powell and Welch (n. 4), 103–33, at 123–9 and id., *Virgil the Partisan: A Study in the Re-integration of Classics* (Swansea, 2008), 31–86.

⁷ Consul in A.D. 14 and friend to Ovid: *Pont.* 4.1, 4.4, 4.15. See Gowing (n. 4), 191–3; *RE* s.v. Pompeius (no. 62, p. 2266).

this Pompeius in a positive context, in an anecdote about a visit to Ceos (2.6.8), in which an old woman entreats Pompeius to grant her the honour of attending her voluntary suicide, then gives him her blessing.⁸ Later, Valerius writes that it would be a crime *not to mention* their exemplary friendship: 4.7 ext. 2 *ego uero grauissimo crimini sim obnoxius, constantis et benignae amicitiae exempla sine ulla eius mentione transgressus*.

Could it be that the seamy description of Hortensius the brothel slave at 3.5.4 and the tactful *recusatio* that follows in 3.6 are covering up (though in effect restaging) the *damnatio memoriae* of Pompey's ignoble son and that this transitional passage, rather than the section *De Pietate*, is the place to look for shreds of his story?⁹ That might seem unlikely, but here are a few clues. First, the metaphors of dangerous sailing and shipwreck in which Valerius couches his withdrawal distinctly evoke the nautical habitat of 'Neptune's admiral'¹⁰ and above all recall his final defeat by Agrippa off Naulochus in 36 B.C., when twenty-eight of his ships were sunk, while the imagined 'whirlpool of turpitude' (*gurgēs turpitudinis*), with its naughty suggestion of gullets and deep swallowing, displaces but also suggests the moral 'filth' so often attaching to Sextus' reputation.¹¹ Secondly, a member of the Pompeius family just happens to have a walk-on part in 3.5.2, on the side of the angels: one Q. Pompeius is the urban praetor who confiscates the patrimony of the Younger Q. Fabius Maximus, to unanimous acclaim. Thirdly, Valerius' patron Sextus Pompeius is portrayed in the Cean episode (deliberately, Gowing believes) with all the characteristics that the gauche, demotic pirate lacked: *omnibus uirtutibus, ita humanitatis quoque laudibus instructissimus*. In particular, he is credited with exceptional powers of speech, *facundissimo sermone*, fulsomely elaborated as 'dripping from his mouth as though from the sacred fountain of eloquence' (*qui ore eius quasi e beato quodam eloquentiae fonte manabat*).¹² The praise squares well with the vigilant oratory of Hortensius senior in our chapter (*lingua eius*

⁸ See Gowing (n. 4), 191–2 on this passage. Valerius' presence on this visit is the only biographical detail we have for him: Bloomer (n. 1), 1.

⁹ On the Augustan and post-Augustan 'erasure' of Sextus' name, see Gowing (n. 4), 188–90. See S. Hinds, Review of H.B. Evans, *Publica Carmina: Ovid's Books from Exile* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), *JRS* 76 (1986), 321–2, at 321, E. Oliensis 'Return to sender: the rhetoric of *nomina* in Ovid's *Tristia*', *Ramus* 26 (1997), 172–93, at 181, and S. Hinds, 'Ovid among the conspiracy theorists', in S.J. Heyworth (ed.), *Classical Constructions: Papers in Memory of Don Fowler* (Oxford, 2007), 194–220, at 208 on Ovid's provocative naming of a latter-day Brutus in *Pont.* 1.1; Hinds (1986), 321 on another Fabius Maximus at *Pont.* 1.2.3–4. Dredging up Sextus: see J.J. Savage, 'The Cyclops, the Sibyl, and the poet', *TAPhA* 93 (1962), 410–42 for Sextus in Horace's *Satires* and Virgil's *Eclogues*; Powell (2008, n. 6), *passim* for Virgil's 'conspiracy' against him.

¹⁰ Hor. *Epod.* 9.7–8 *Neptunius | dux*. Valerius is admittedly fond of both plain sailing and shipwreck metaphors: e.g. 5.7 *praef. det nunc uela pii et placidi adfectus parentum erga liberos indulgentia, salubrique aura propecta gratam suauitatis dotem secum adferat* (parental kindness as a calmer subject); 6.9 ext. 7 (the shipwreck of fortune); 8.1 *absol. 12 inter maximos et grauissimos infamiae fluctus emersit, tamquam fragmentum naufragii leue admodum genus defensionis amplexus* (a man caught in a married man's bedroom clutches at an excuse like the fragment of a shipwreck: that he was led there by passion for a slave). See also 6.4.5 (Brutus jettisons his reputation for virtue) *illas [uirtutes] in profundum praecipitauit et omnem nominis sui memoriam inextinguibili detestatione perfudit* (discussed by Gowing [n. 1], 55–6).

¹¹ e.g. Lucan 7.380–1: Sextus prays to escape *ultima fata ... ac turpes extremi cardinis annos*; id. 6.422 *polluit aequoreos Siculus pirata triumphos*.

¹² Gowing (n. 4), 192 (citing Vell. 2.73.1 on Pompey's son: *studiis rudis, sermone barbarus*): 'Valerius' depiction of his friend Sextus is affected or conditioned by the lingering vestiges of the negative tradition of Sextus Pompeius.'

... *pro salute ciuium in foro excubuerat*). But the image of eloquence ‘dripping from the mouth’ also strangely anticipates Hortensius junior’s linguistic endeavours. Valerius’ pointed contrast in 3.5 between different kinds of tongue-work counters, while exploiting it, a long satirical tradition, starting with Aristophanes’ portrait of the tragedian Agathon, in which one kind of oral skill is all too easily elided with another.¹³

In short, it appears that a trail of over-compensating and possibly subliminal corrections, particularly in the use of metaphors, lies behind Valerius’ efforts to rewrite Pompeian family history and censor any reference to its blackest sheep. Indeed, the physical disgust he simulates at the thought of Hortensius’ activities distracts us so effectively from the double bind of potential tactlessness to his patron that it has never been suspected that the disgraced Sextus Pompeius has any presence, or absence, here at all (cf. 2.6.8 *Pompei praesentia*, of Valerius’ patron).¹⁴ But despite Valerius’ apparent success in swallowing Sextus up in the folds of memory, it seems possible, according to a ‘suspicious’¹⁵ reading at least, that he was having it both ways. Not only does the silence speak for itself, not only is Sextus the most conspicuously excluded of the ugly ghosts of the past (*deformes umbrae*), but we are given more than one chance to glimpse the wreckage of this unmentionable degenerate bobbing ‘accidentally’ in *gurgite uasto*.¹⁶

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¹³ Ar. *Thesm.* 49–57 with H.D. Jocelyn, ‘A Greek indecency and its students: *ΛΑΙΚΑΖΕΙΝ*’, *PCPhS* 26 (1980), 12–66, at 26 and n. 145 (for the equation in Old Comedy between fine oratory and ‘unmanly sexual practices’, he compares Ar. *Eq.* 878–80, *Nub.* 1093–4, *Vesp.* 686–95, *Eccl.* 112–13, Eup. fr. 100, Plat. com. fr. 186). See also L. McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman* (Princeton, 1999), 220–1 and N. Worman, *Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2008), 62–120, 213–74. For distaste for the *os impurum* in Rome, see A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1992), 26–9 and A. Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton, 1996), 99–127.

¹⁴ Gowing (n. 4), 191: ‘[T]here was little risk that the reader of Valerius Maximus would confuse *his* Sextus Pompeius with *our* Sextus Pompeius, for it is worth noting that in all of the *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* Valerius not once mentions the latter.’

¹⁵ Hinds (2007, n. 9), 199, 214.

¹⁶ After a list of five examples of despicable behaviour (two belong to the Younger Scipio), Sextus is barred from the *sixth* slot.