

Masculinity and public space in the Greco-Roman period: Implications for Africa today

Mary Getui

Catholic University of Eastern Africa
Kenya
mngetui@yahoo.com

Grace Kambona Richard

St Augustine University of Tanzania
grkambona@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article focuses on masculinity in relation to public space during the Greco-Roman period, and implications for Africa today. The key issues addressed include: an overview on what masculinity entailed at the said period, namely the physique, the duties and the expectations of the society on the man and the expectations of the man of self; public space as manifested through patriarchy and the related responsibilities such as procreation, headship of the family, voting, being an orator, being of service to the community, commanding the peoples respect, possessing wealth and the respective status and having military prowess. In the midst of the above high expectations and stringent demands, virtue was not to be compromised. The two virtues highlighted in this article are courage and self-control. Contemporary Africa can draw several lessons on the importance of culture, socialization and virtue from aspects of masculinity and public space during the Greco-Roman period.

Keywords

Greco-Roman; masculinity; public space; virtue; Africa

1. Greco-Roman Period

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, the Greco-Roman Period is the classical period of cultural history between the 8th century B.C. and 5th century B.C. It was a period centred around the Mediterranean Sea, comprising the interlocking civilizations of ancient Greece and ancient Rome known as the Greco-Roman world. It is the period in which Greek

and Roman society flourished and wielded great influence throughout Europe, North Africa and Western Asia.

When Alexander conquered the Persians around 334 B.C., Greek culture swept over the Persian Empire and became very popular. About 168 B.C. the Romans took control of the Greeks, Roman culture swept through that portion of the Greek world. But Greek culture retained much of its vitality, blending with the Roman culture in both the eastern and western halves of the Mediterranean. In the first century A.D. Greek and Roman cultures had been blending around the Mediterranean. This period is regarded as a time of peace and tranquillity. Definitely, a lot can be identified with this period, but for purposes of this article we shall focus on the masculinity as relates to public space in the following:

- Patriarchy
- Political participation
- Virtue
- Courage on the battlefield
- Self-control

2. Masculinity and public space during the Greco-Roman period

“Masculinity” refers to the socially produced but embodied ways of being male. Its manifestations include manners of speech, behaviour, gestures, social interaction, division of task, and all overall narrative that positions it as superior to its perceived antithesis, femininity. In all cultures, a wide variety of conceptions of gender and sexuality existed before the advent of the modern era. Many forms of expression: body appearance, gestures, voice, and so on were seen to be part of maleness and femaleness. This was manifested in a separation of reason from nature which works to divide men from their emotions and feelings which become threatening to their identities as men. Men were exhorted to disdain emotions and feelings as sign of weakness and so potentially compromising their sense of male identity (Srivastava 2012).

The body was foundational in the Greco-Roman construction of gender, insofar as Roman law required an infant’s classification at birth as male or

female. Such classification was done by visual observation of the external appearance of the genitalia. Thus, initially the body did determine whether one was male or female. But the body was ultimately not of primary importance in the achievement of ideal masculinity. Instead, the male body was viewed as the perfected, more complete body when compared to the female gestures; mobility of eyes, quality of voice, and stature were also part of discussion. Being well proportioned is most critical; it is an indication of an upright and brave man. Thus, sexual anatomy does not necessarily make the man; certain physical characteristics reveal him (Conway 2008).

Conway, writing about how to be a man in the Greco-Roman world, considers the Thales: the expressions of gratitude reported by Diogenes of the pre-Socratic philosophers, which say “there were three blessings for which he was grateful to fortune: firstly, that I was born a human being and not one of the brutes; secondly, that I was born a man and not a woman and lastly, that I was born a Greek, and not a Barbarian” (2008: 15) Therefore in the Greco-Roman era, a man ranks higher than a woman. Conway highlights the image of the ideal man that runs across a full range of Greek and Latin texts throughout the Greco-Roman period. Male is more perfect than female, it is said by the naturalists that the female is nothing else than an imperfect male. A female was simply a lesser, incomplete version of man (2008). For Romans even if one is born a male, if he fails to maintain character and norms attributed to a man, he is considered to be a female. This is exactly what Conway summarises by Gardner by saying “Once the boy becomes an adult, the presence or absence of male reproductive organs is not what endangers that privilege. Instead, it is *acting* like a woman” (in Conway 2008: 20).

In connection to that, in the ancient Roman world it was not enough to be born a male, even a free Roman male citizen. One also had to act the part of the man. Yet, if the body was paradoxical in the way it did and did not reveal gender identity, so also the role that men were asked to play contained certain contradictions. On the one hand, acting like a man required one to assume the active role in private sexual practice as well as one’s public life. At the same time, such a role also required the careful display of control and restraint, both with respect to one’s passions-sexual and otherwise, and in terms of treatment of the other (Conway 2008:22).

A man was expected to be the actor, rather than one acted upon. This is because, from the philosophical sphere to the social; masculinity was understood to be the active, rational, and the generative principle of the cosmos. Thus, Aristotle can speak of male as more divine or “godlike” due to their active role in creation. Similarly, Philo explains that “the female gender is maternal, passive, corporeal and sense – perceptible while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought” (in Conway 2008:51). Thus, the activity of men was linked to the creative activity of the gods. In this sense, to be active often involved expressing one’s dominion over another. To be passive meant to submit to this domination (Conway 2008:22).

Public spaces in the Greco-Roman period included institutions and non-institutional spaces such as state bureaucracies, schools, the legal system, the police, the streets and parks. There is a relationship between gender and space, that is, public space is related to male gender and private space is related to female gender. The public sphere has historically been defined as that of men and the private (domestic) as that of women who have the capacity for maternal care and emotional response. Similarly, arguments can be made for other spaces such as streets, parks, offices, bazaars, shopping malls, schools and university campuses (Srivastava 2012). In this article, we consider public space to be both that which was regarded as public – namely political participation and virtues with focus on courage and self-control that should be manifested or displaced in public. As will be seen in 2.4 and 2.5 below, in the Greco-Roman period, courage and more so self-control which can be regarded as emotionally related, were given accolade for the men of that era.

2.1 Masculinity and patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to a system of social organization which is fundamentally organized around the idea of men’s superiority to women. Patriarchy refers to the systemic relationship of power between men and women, whereas masculinity concerns both inter and intra-gender relationships. And, while it cannot be argued that under patriarchy all forms of masculinity are equally valorised, there is nevertheless an overwhelming consensus regarding the superiority of men over men. Patriarchy makes men superior,

whereas masculinity is the process of producing superior men (Srivastava 2012).

To be a man also implies being the head of a household. The manly ideal in Athens included marriage, fatherhood, estate management, and mastery over slaves. Those who failed to marry and produce children, or who squandered their inheritance, or failed to control their slaves also failed at being a man. Especially in Sparta, to have children, the primary focus was to produce future warriors for the state (Rubarth 2014). Here, therefore, a man is expected to practice his manliness as the guide and defence of the society. Ideally, he will be a loyal citizen who is publicly minded and not overly aggressive. He will also be a zealous guardian of his honour, control his appetites, be guided by reason, be truthful, produce children, and preserve his patrimony. The man who would fall short of a good masculinity is or does roughly the reverse of these things: he is outrageous in his actions and reactions (that is, hubristic), only concerned with himself, liable to give way to desire, and one to waste resource. The man whose manhood is defective can be assimilated to slaves and women (Masterson 2014).

Man was Hector. Hector is the chief person on the Trojan side who competes in the same way that Achilles does, that is to say, he is incredibly courageous and so forth. He was identified as an exemplar. He loves his wife, he loves his son, and he feels a tremendous degree of actual responsibility to his family, to his nation.

What we gather from the ideas above is that masculinity and patriarchy are bedfellows. Masculinity is mainly process but also practice, while patriarchy is mainly practice. Process is a string of actions to produce a result while practice is the accumulation of skill over time. This means that, the two realities are not essentially the same. The irony is that while they seem to be for the common good, the reality is that the favour is to and for the man.

2.2 Masculinity and political participation

The Greco-Roman world was politically dominated by men. All the emperors were men; only men were the senators, the proconsuls, the praetors, and every other ordinary officer of state. If any of them were women, they were

so exceptional as not to alter the overwhelming male dominance. Women were excluded from voting in political elections (Maxwell 1988).

During the Greco-Roman period, to become a man meant becoming the ruler rather than the ruled (Conway 2008:31). In Athens, an essential part of masculine identity was to be actively involved in the running of the state. This entails more than just voting. An Athenian male was expected to serve on different committees, act on juries, join political associations, keep informed, and argue about politics constantly. The most powerful men became politicians, which mean using rhetoric for political ends. While the masculinity of rhetoric and sophistry gave an individual political power and control, it appeared to do so at the cost of a strong and healthy body and a traditional commitment to the family. However, externals such as wealth, security, respect, and status in society were appreciated (Rubarth 2014).

2.3 Masculinity and virtue

In the Greco-Roman world, there is a relationship between true man and virtue. *Virtus* means “manly excellence” (Roman and Luke 2010); *Virtus* is often reasonably translated with “virtue” (Masterson 2014:28). Philosophers formulated cardinal virtues: self-control, wisdom, justice, intelligence and courage; and certain practical gifts like military skill, dignity, prosperity, and generosity. All these were to be cultivated both singly and as a whole with utmost care. To become a “vir” in the Greco-Roman world, one was required to demonstrate manliness through the practice of particular virtues. *Virtus*, often translated as “virtue”, is etymologically equivalent to “manliness”. So, the male was named man (“vir”), because strength in him is greater than in woman. Hence, too, courage (or valor, *virtus*) has received its name (Conway 2008:22–23).

Kuefler says, “Virtue was so intimately linked to maleness in the Roman universe that it is impossible to separate Roman definitions of masculinity from more general notions of ideal human behaviour” (2001:19). The good king must be a model to his subjects; by his virtues he ensures the continued well-being of the commonwealth. Hence, through his actions he shows himself possessed of the noblest virtues: piety towards gods and men, wisdom, courage and prowess in battle, temperance, generosity, faithfulness, and love of truth. Caesar Augustus was a key figure in

construing the emperor as a model of all the best of Roman masculinity (Conway 2008). Nevertheless, if you had *virtus*, if you have physical courage and strength, it does elevate you and makes you a hero by some Roman definition, which they get away from no matter how civilized they get and no matter how reluctant they could individually be to fight either as gladiators or as warriors. *Virtus* also included the knowledge of what is right, useful and honourable for a man; what things are good and bad; what is useless, shameful, and dishonourable. *Virtus* in its very essence means giving that which is owed to honour, regarding the interests of the fatherland first, those of parents next, and third and last our own. *Virtus* come to designate the power and excellence of all manner of things (Masterson 2014:23).

It was apparent to the men of Rome, but especially to men of power, that it was manly virtue that distinguished them from those whom they considered barbarians. It was their *virtus* that made them great. There was no doubt; the Romans believed they were victorious because they were better men than their adversaries. They were certain that it was *virtus* which would make or break them as men, as would it determine the success of their civilization. Virtues made man like excellence in war (Atlas 2014: n.p)

2.4 Masculinity on the battlefield: military power and courage

The Greeks come up with a series of important virtues one of what is *andreia*, which means military courage and excellence. Greek conception of masculinity is intimately tied to the virtue of courage. Courage comes from the Greek word *andreia* which is attributed to a male adult or manliness (Bassi 2003:31). Courage is usually used to specify the excellence of bravery and valour, especially on the battlefield. Battlefield is the primary locus for *andreia*. Hence this is an excellence or virtue not normally applied to women, except by analogy, since women were excluded from military training and activity in all Greek cities. Courage in battle was primarily seen as a male affair (Rubarth 2014). *Andreia* is similar to *arete*, and the basic meaning of *arete* is courage or success in battle. It is any excellence, bravery and strength in battle. So, it is just the quality of being a man for the purpose defined in military terms, which basically means courage.

Courage is only one way for a Greek male to perform masculinity (Rubarth 2014). A true man faces death fearlessly and courageously (Conway

2008:31). Such displays were often expressed in terms of courage in battle with a formidable opponent. Conway quotes Cicero who speaks of the ‘hard fighting’ and the officer’s unquestionable courage in battle where the noble acts of suicide were also counted as displays of bravery. One notable example is the suicide of Otho as described by Suetonius, that the courageous suicide of Otho was enough to overcome the reputation of effeminacy that he had gained during life (in Conway 2008:29).

The ideal Greek man was “an Achilles”, the hero, that is, one who is brave and strong, some examples being like Herakles and Patroclus. The ideal hero dies young, in the prime of his life. He is a tremendous warrior; he is the strongest, the swiftest, the most accurate thrower of the spear, and the most accurate stabber with swords. Achilles frequently appears fully armed. Achilles carries a shield and spear and wears a Corinthian helmet. In war this is manifested by things like organizing ambushes or effective deployments (Roman and Luke 2010:9).

It is important to focus on Achilles, for he is a defining model for ancient man right through the whole of antiquity. Achilles expresses his manhood through the physical acts of the warrior, and through the maintenance of status in relation to peers, with whom he both cooperates and competes. Both physical abilities of body and excellence in speech are important for the acquisition of manly glory of which this is not possible for women. Achilles takes himself out of the running for the glory that will honour him as a man in order to preserve his honour in the eyes of the men. He cannot be seen to accept without protest Agamemnon’s taking of his war prize. In order for him to follow his heart, he must eat it out, as it were. Achilles must be distinctive, alone and manifests his warrior prowess. He is to be glorious beyond other men (Masterson 2014:18–19).

To Spartan culture, men were professional soldiers. From the age of seven they were trained exclusively for combat. Young Spartan men lived in camps, trained continuously, and were not permitted by law to participate in farming or trade. Every aspect of their society prepared them for war. Hence courage, as a human excellence took precedence over the other traditional virtues such as wisdom, justice, moderation, and pity. Boys underwent brutal and harsh training and discipline, in such a way that the initiate was able to develop courage (Rubarth 2014). This disciplining of

the body involved physical as well as mental discipline. There is abundant evidence to suggest that physical beatings were a common part of a young boy's education from classical Greece through the empire (Conway 2008:33).

Furthermore, Conway says, training in rhetoric involved "erasing any traces of feminine and servile practice, disciplining the student's body to maintain an upright posture, unwavering gaze, restrained gestures, and other signs that enacted his social dominance. Such discipline was paramount to the project of transforming a youth into a master" (2008:33).

Since a Spartan's identity and value in culture was linked to his courage, the shame of cowardice was far more profound. Dropping a shield in battle, which allows one to outrun the heavily armed attacker, was seen as a classic case of cowardice. A Spartan would rather die than return from battle without his shield. Rubarth quotes Plutarch who says that Spartan mothers would send their sons off to war with the following admonition: "Come back with your shield or on it" (Rubarth 2014).

To Athenians courage was also highly valued, they had noble feats of courage such as those performed at Marathon and Salamis and were deservedly celebrated. Courage was one of many virtues. Athenian teens also trained for war as part of their coming to age rites. All healthy adult citizens were expected to step up to battle when the city needed them (Rubarth 2014).

The idea of Stoic philosophers looked at courage in a very different way. For them all the virtues are forms of knowledge. Courage is knowledge of what is terrible, what is not, and what is neither. Courage is the knowledge that life, death, suffering, mutilation, and pain are not evil since they harm only the body. True evil is harming one's own soul by ignorantly choosing to do wrong. The Stoic knows that death is in the cards for everyone. So, the real question is not how to avoid death, but how to die nobly. Thus, Stoics do not face fear (Rubarth 2014).

2.5 Masculinity and self-control in public

Ancient manhood was connected with ideals of self-control and mastery of others (Masterson, 2014:28). True men avoided anger, lust, luxury, avarice, and excess of any kind. A true man should not exhibit tears or distress when in pain. The Greeks come to be interested in the competitive virtue of

the wisdom of self-control and in justness, that it is a competitive quality, everyone is competing to be more just than everybody else. In classical times a tremendous emphasis is placed on the suppression of emotion, always appearing absolutely calm, they all look calm because they are trying to demonstrate their self-control. That makes an impact on real people's sense of what manliness is.

Self-control shrinks from injuring anyone by wanton word or deed; and it fears to do or say anything that may appear unmanly. By the first century, largely under the influence of Stoic teaching, self-control emerges among the most important keys to ideal masculinity. Moderation, or self-mastery, was frequently discussed in terms of mastery of the passions, especially lust and anger, but also self-restraints in eating, drinking, and luxury in general. For many, it was obvious that true men should not lose their dignity through a violent display of anger against another. This is because the angry man's conduct turns him into an undignified and unmanly figure (Conway 2008:24, 26-27).

The loss of temper is no sign of manliness, anger is a much as mark of weakness as is grief; in that both of them receive a wound and submit to defeat. Anger is associated with women. Conway quotes Seneca who says "anger is a most womanish and childish weakness" (Conway 2008:27-28). Because of this, children were brought up and told gentlemen do not show emotion, to show emotion is womanly. When people died women tore their hair out and they shrieked. Most famous in Athenian history is Pericles, never even wept at his son's funerals, except at the last one when he then had no more legitimate heirs, who would never go to drinking parties because it was impossible to maintain an adequate reserve. We must imagine him as being an exceptionally marmoreal person, never showing any emotion, never smiling, never frowning.

3. Implications of masculinity and public space for Africa today

Reflecting on the Greco-Roman era, with special focus on masculinity and public space and the implication for Africa today, several lessons and challenges emerge, that have relevance not just broadly for the continent, but for as food for thought for individuals as well. An era, whether it be

for an individual institution, the nation or the wider society, is not just a passing wind. Whatever happens has social and other implications for the moment and for the short term and long-term future. The ripples of the Greco-Roman era on masculinity are evident today. What does Africa have to offer or show for her eras?

Society has certain expectations and requirements for the individual, and further, these expectations and requirements are often gender driven, hence it matters whether one is male or female. Society also labels people, and in the process the individual could be compromised. For Africa one of the institutions that has high expectations, requirements on the individual is culture. An individual could easily lose their individuality and drown in the cultural expectations, requirements and label. This calls for individuals to be alert to this reality and to rise above the society's tide. Africa ought to recognize that culture is both a blessing and a curse and be prudent enough to move on with that which promotes human dignity. Like a coin the individual has two sides: the inner (private) space and the outer (public) space. Often times, the society concentrates more on the public space, and yet there could be more, and more of the person in the private space. This challenges for the individual to cultivate and concentrate more on the private space. Since the public space may not necessary fully manifest the private space, society should not use public space to determine or even undermine the quality and/or quantity of the individual. The practice in the Greco-Roman era was that the private space ought to be cultivated and appreciated. This private space should not necessarily have gender intonation.

Masculinity has to do with power. In the Greco-Roman era, this was manifested with the position of the man as the voter, as head of the family, master of the slaves, and one who engaged in estate management, as well as being informed and participating in public debate. Power, which is often associated with public space, should be interrogated when dealing with issues of masculinity. In the Greco-Roman era, power seems to have been coupled with responsibility and obligation. For example, the husband/father was expected to be good to his family. The privilege of voting called for loyal citizenry. Estate management called for hard work. A publicly minded individual could not act out of selfishness but was expected to be mindful for their actions and the consequences for the wider society.

A public minded individual contributed to a healthy and friendly public space. This could be an antidote for the apparent rampant corruption in Africa. This could also address the volatile situations in families.

Socialization plays a key role in inculcating and promoting masculinity. A young man of the Greco-Roman era was socialized by the society, including the family and more so the mother. Socialization agents such as school, family and faith institutions determine to a very great extent the kind of product an individual turns out to be. This means that the school system, the family and the faith institutions in Africa have a responsibility regarding the content and methodology of socialization. To expect to harvest mangos, one has to plant and nurture the mango seed/seedling. It would be foolhardy to expect harvesting mangos if what you planted is an orange.

The Greco-Roman era promoted virtue – violence and aggressiveness were not features of men except in war, courage, bravery, perseverance, self-control/mastery, fearlessness, swiftness, accuracy, heroism, mental discipline, admiration by others, not being emotional, loving of truth, wisdom, justice, moderation, pity, and loyal citizenship, loyal to family, piety towards deity, oratory and martial prowess. If virtue is promoted in public space intra and inter tensions and conflicts could be minimized. The two virtues that we have highlighted, namely courage and self-control would perhaps assist in arresting or restraining gender-based violence that is common stay in Africa today. The media is awash with incidents of gender-based violence.

If virtue is acknowledged, practiced and promoted, masculinity and public space would be objectively critiqued to serve towards the common good of humanity.

References

- Bassi, K. 2003. “The semantics of manliness in ancient Greece.” In R.M. Rosen and I. Sluiter, eds. *Andria: Studies in manliness and courage in classical antiquity*. Leiden: Brill. 25–58.
- Conway, C.M. 2008. *Behold the man. Jesus and Greco-Roman masculinity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Kuefler, M. 2001. *The manly eunuch: masculinity, gender ambiguity, and Christian ideology in late antiquity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Masterson, M. 2014. “Studies of ancient masculinity.” In T.K. Hubbard, ed. *A companion to Greek and Roman sexualities*. London: Blackwell, 17–30.
- Roman, L. and Luke, M. 2010. *Encyclopaedia of Greek and Roman mythology*. New York, NY: InfoBase.
- Rubarth, S. 2014. “Competing constructions of masculinity in ancient Greece.” *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, 1(1):21–32.
- Srivastava, S. 2012. “Masculinity and its role in gender-based violence in public space.” [Online]. Available: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277014141> [Accessed: 6/4/2019].