

Marked Men: Discipleship and Masculinity in Mark

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Achilles Tatius, author of the ancient novel, *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, recounts a scene in which the hero, Cleitophon, is attacked by Thersander, the unexpectedly reappearing husband of the woman, Melite, with whom he is found. As Thersander's assault continues with no retaliation by Cleitophon, the hero says that "finally we grew tired: he of beating me and I of philosophizing." By humorously equating Cleitophon's passivity with the philosopher's vocation, Achilles Tatius at once mocks and attests to a widespread preoccupation with the suffering male subject in both the fictional and philosophical discourses produced in the early imperial period. With the help of postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Homi Bhabha, I want to situate Mark's own interest in male suffering and servility, as it appears in his discipleship discourse, within this broader cultural moment. Under the pressures of political autocracy, ambivalent attraction to public figures of vulnerability—paradigmatically the gladiator, the slave, and later, the martyr—funded the anxious male imaginary with new role-models and promoted a self-consciously performative embodiment of gender itself, as several historians of antiquity point out.¹ Mark's (male) disciples, like the gladiator and the slave, I will argue, stand as (colonial) mimics of masculinity. With respect to leadership in Mark's community, "[t]he decisive point is that [Jesus] sees in [service] the thing which makes a man His disciple."² Or that makes a man *out of* his disciple, as the case may be.

Let us catch up with Jesus and his twelve male disciples. On the road to Jerusalem, after Jesus relates for the third and final time his impending date with death, the brothers Zebedee make a request of him: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (10:36). James and John, notes Ben Witherington, "expect Jesus, once he enters Jerusalem, to restore its former glory and reestablish David's throne. They understand Jesus' messiahship as royal and political" (437). Seats at Jesus' right and left may signify privileged positions at the messianic banquet or, more likely in light of the reference to Jesus' "glory," thrones at the eschatological judgment (Gundry: 583; Myers: 278; cf. 8:38; 13:26). Matthew's Jesus, responding to Peter's charge that the disciples have left everything to follow him, explicitly promises his followers "twelve thrones" for "judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). When pressed, James and John affirm their ability to swim in the overwhelming tide of suffering that is

¹ See Burrus, "Torture and Travail," 1-13; Barton, Sorrows, 11-46; Gleason, chaps. 1 and 6; and Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity."

² Herman Beyer, "diakonew," TDNT 2:93.

Jesus' baptism, a tempest poured out of the cup from which they too will drink (10:38-39; cf. Gundry: 584; Witherington: 287). Jesus agrees. They will share his fate, but the seats belong not to them, he says, but to "those for whom it has been prepared," perhaps ironically alluding to the bandits who will be crucified on either side of him (Gundry: 578). Apparently upset that the Zebedees have jumped the gun on them, the other ten male disciples grow angry at their presumption (10:41; Witherington, 288). Earlier, in Galilee, all twelve had argued about who among them was "the greatest" (9:34; cf. 9:38-41; 10:13-16; cf. Myers: 260-62). In both scenes, the twelve betray their investment in hegemonic masculinity as they vie for the limited resources of male honor they expect to be available in Jesus' messianic new world order (on the notion of "limited good," see Malina:81-107).

As before, Jesus begins to teach. Now, however, it's an explicit lesson in (anti-) colonial politics (10:42; cf. 9:35). "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers have dominion over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them," he says (10:42; my translation; cf. Clark; Carter: 170). By addressing the pretensions of Roman domination in the context of the Zebedees' ambitions, Jesus implies that his disciples' understanding of messianism amounts to a replication of colonialism (Horsley, 2001:228) and elite male hegemony. He critiques his male disciples' interest in being "first" or "great" as a desire to hold power over others, acknowledging a "partial presence" of the imperial rule that will shortly kill him (cf. 10:33-34). Once again describing his own take on authority, Jesus now intends to mark a difference between the community formed in his name and that of the dominate colonial power: "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:43-45; cf. 9:35). Yet the Son of Man, no less than the Sons of Thunder, still finds himself bound to the logic of "tops" and "bottoms." Mark's messiah reconfigures the hegemony of being "first" and "great" through an inversion that fails to undo fully the structure of hierarchy. Mark's (male) disciples may become "first" and "great" precisely by assuming the position of servant and slave, a script of self-fashioning that pivots on and thus reinscribes the very distinction between "top" and "bottom" it intends to resist (Myers: 278; Witherington: 290; Seeley: 234, 239; cf. Carter: 170). "Servant" and "slave" retain something of their stigmatized "otherness" in Mark's discourse on discipleship. Though Jesus' followers will preach and perform exorcisms as he did (3:13-19; 6:7-13), and so appear similarly as bandit-like rebels in Satan's realm, the disciples are here invited to imitate the slave's "feminized" social position, while paradoxically defining their status as "first" and "great" in contrast to the slave's inferiority. Like other philosophical appropriations of the slave and the slave soldier, the gladiator, Mark's discipleship discourse complicates the disciples' masculinity as we will see.

With what shall we compare Mark's version of "servant leadership"? When Paul says that though a free man, he makes himself "a slave to all" (1 Cor. 9:19) so that he might win more people for Christ, he presents himself as a populist leader according to Dale Martin (86-116; 124-26; 132-35). A debated and at times despised figure in antique

political philosophy, the “enslaved leader” aims to benefit his constituency most effectively by identifying (in appearance at least) with their status, inviting charges of hypocrisy, opportunism, and ignoble *levitas* from his opponents and other conservative *politicos* (Martin: 91-114). Neither Paul, the populist, nor Mark’s I would add, completely surrender their authority, as Martin notes:

The populist who lowers himself does not really give up power or cease to be a leader. The enslaved leader actually gains power by a step down in status. The populist does not completely give up the patronal form of social structure but steps outside the normal patronal structures of status and authority to appeal directly to the masses. [...] The power is shifted, not lost. [...] It is an exercise of authority, but a more subtle, ambiguous authority that is not based on normal social position and normal status hierarchy (134-35).

Like the “enslaved leader” of populist rhetoric, the Cynic philosopher undergoes a kind of subjection in the exercise of his (divine) office; indentured to the deity, rather than the masses, he affects an indifference to social convention that frees him to move down the ladder of status without fear of shame (cf. Epictetus, *Disc.* 3.24.67-77; 3.26.32-36; 4.1.114-116; Martin: 85-88). David Seeley hints that for both Epictetus and Mark (though not the populist politician) such voluntary and metaphorical submission expands to incorporate the actual slave’s exposure to physical abuse (Seeley:240-45; Fitzgerald: 91-92; Epictetus, *Disc.* 4.1.76-79; cf. Seneca *De Benif.* 3.20). Epictetus’s discourse, “On the Calling of a Cynic,” like several of Mark’s discipleship passages (cf. 8:34-9:1; 10:17-22), invites an inquisitive interlocutor to consider his interest in philosophy carefully. For not unlike the disciples who will be “beaten in synagogues” (13:9), the Cynic, too, “must needs be beaten like a ass,” though “while he is being beaten he must love those who beat him, as though he were the father or brother of them all,” (3.22.54; my trans.; cf. 4.1.76-79) if, that is, he is to wield the “staff of Diogenes” (3.22.58). Who, then, can befriend a Cynic? Only one with a Herculean capacity for pain, a fellow Cynic who also shares “with him his scepter and kingdom” and proves himself a “worthy servant” (3.22.63; 55-67; my trans.).

Epictetus’s wandering wise man performs as a solo *sophos*, since marriage (in the present social order) distracts from “the service of God” (3.22.69). As “one who shares in the government of Zeus,” (3.22.95; cf. 3.22.48-49; 63; 72; 76; 79), the Cynic engages in a politics far nobler than any other (3.22.83-85). Unlike the “kings and tyrants of the world” who rule by force, the Cynic’s “power” to govern comes from his “conscience;” his every thought “is that of a friend and servant of the gods” (3.22.95; 94-96). Service here, as in Mark’s discourse, encompasses suffering for others. Epictetus remarks of Diogenes:

Come, was there anybody that Diogenes did not love, a man who was so gentle and kind-hearted that he gladly took upon himself all those troubles and physical hardships for the sake of the commonweal? But what was the manner of his loving? As became a servant of Zeus, caring for people indeed, but at the same time subject unto God (3.24.64-65).

Of his pain—whether in the form of poverty, loss of status, exile, or even the tyrant’s sword—the philosopher takes no notice. Listen as Epictetus literally loses his voice extolling the freedom from fear made possible by being subject to the will of God alone: Who is there, then, that I *can* any longer be afraid of? [...] For I regard God’s will as better than my will. I shall attach myself to Him as a servant and follower, my choice is one with His, my desire one with His, in a word, my will is one with His will (4.7.19-20).

As “servants” of the community (cf. Gundry: 586) Jesus’ (male) “followers” model their servile suffering supremely on his own (Gundry: 589; Myers: 279; Witherington: 288; Tolbert, 1989:317-18; cf. Seeley: 246). The Son of Man “serves,” too, giving his very life “as a ransom for many” (10:45). John N. Collins points out that here “to serve” is not “expressing directly the idea of servanthood but the activity of the servant in respect of his commission” (251). Though “the commission itself can be to any kind of activity,” Jesus’ charge “to give his life” specifies his divine appointment (Collins: 251). In effect, he slides from service into outright servitude, dying a slave’s death that (paradoxically) manumits “many” and (con)fuses submission and subversion (cf. Myers: 279; Collins, 1997). Jesus’ fate is prefigured by the persecuted prophets, who appear as slaves in the parable of the wicked tenants (12:2, 4; cf. Matt. 23:29-35; Jer. 7:25, 25:41 Joshua 14:7; Amos 3:7; Zech 1:4-6; Ps 94 (95); Myers:279; Witherington: 320). Similarly, according to Ronald Hock, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness as God’s slave-messenger (1:2-3), respecting the aristocratic protocols of the returning landlord by preceding Jesus, the heir of God’s estate (315-19). Speaking of the return of the glorified Son of Man, Jesus is represented in the parable of the doorkeeper both as the sojourning “master of the house” and, like the disciples, as a slave (13:32-37). Not simply one slave among many, according to Timothy Geddert, Jesus is himself the doorkeeper who faithfully keeps watch throughout the hours of his passion and who exhibits the unwavering vigilance and unconditional obedience expected of all God’s “slaves” (Geddert: 105-6).

If both Mark and Epictetus appropriate for themselves the slave’s obedience and vulnerability, adopting this strategically “feminized” stance affords both disciple and philosopher an alternative stage for the performance of masculine virtue. Recall the comments, quoted earlier, of Mark’s contemporary, Seneca the Younger, comparing the Stoic life with that of an enslaved warrior, the gladiator (*Epistulae* 37.1-4; cf. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.29.37). At once despised and praised, desired and derided, the gladiator stood as a magnetic figure of honor lost and (impossibly) regained, simultaneously repulsive and attractive to a cultural elite humiliated under imperial rule. By his oath, his *sacramentum*, the gladiator both announced his slave status and expressed his volition, “and so, at the very moment that he [became] a slave condemned to death, he [also became] a free agent and a man with honor to uphold,” as classicist Carlin Barton notes (1993:15). For Seneca, the athlete’s and the gladiator’s victorious suffering mirrors the philosopher’s moral triumph, a “reward [that] is not a garland or palm or a trumpeter...but rather virtue, steadfastness of soul, and a peace that is won for all time...” (*Ep.* 78:17; cf. *De Prov.* 4:4-16).

For later Christian writers, such as Tertullian and Cyprian, the martyr took up, with surpassing severity, the gladiator’s *sacramentum* (Barton, 1994:56). Mark lacks the oath, but not, I suggest, its logic. Let us briefly return to two points on the way laid out for Jesus’ disciples. In Caesarea Philippi, after upbraiding Peter for misunderstanding his vocation, Jesus addresses the men and women of the crowd along with his disciples and spells out for the first time his expectations of his followers:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to

gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (8:34-38).

Enlisting with Jesus requires a willingness to die for his sake and for the sake of the message of his counter-empire (cf. 1:14-15). Talk of denying oneself and taking up a cross registers the legal and even imperial contexts in which a disciple may expect to make his ultimate sacrifice (Myers:246). Addressing Peter, James, John, and Andrew on the Mt. Of Olives, Jesus makes this explicit:

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved (13:9-13).

Playing the slave to Jesus, the master (13:33-37), the ideal disciple publishes his good news to “all the nations” (13:10) and stands as a witness to hostile governors and kings (13:9; 8:35). Like the gladiator, this disciple exhibits his or her voluntarism (“if any wish”) through an act of self-renunciation (indeed self-destruction, *apolesei*, 8:35), one that commits him to endure hatred, persecution, betrayal, beatings, and death. And the “name” by which the disciple worked miracles (9:37-41; cf. 13:6; Witherington: 739-41), now signifies the performance of a “savage miracle,” a transformation that exceeds in reach the gladiator’s own paradoxically exalted status. For where the gladiator’s fearlessness in the face of death might win him the philosopher’s applause as a moral exemplum, the honor of a *vir fortis*, the disciple regains that which neither the philosopher or the gladiator could (or would) imagine—his very life—as well as honor in the eyes of the returning Son of Man (cf. 8:38; 13:26-27).

Neither the gladiator nor (especially) the martyr won unequivocal admiration, as is well known (Barton, 1994). Tertullian testifies to the public’s contradictory love for the condemned swordsman: “Men give them their souls, women their bodies too....On one and the same account, they glorify them and degrade and diminish them [...] Yet, they love whom they punish; they belittle whom they esteem; the art they glorify, the artist they debase” (*De spect.* 22; Barton 1993:12). I suggest that it is from this “interstitial” space between art and artist, a space marked by an ambivalent *artifice*, that the gladiator’s gender comes into view, neither “feminized” nor fully masculine. Like the rituals of sadomasochism, the rituals of the arena involve the play of mimesis and mimicry. Lynda Hart’s theorizing of sadomasochism as a kind of (Bhabhian and Irigarayan) mimicry contrasts the two modes of representation: “Mimicry repeats rather than re-presents; it is a repetition that is nonreproductive. Mimesis operates in the order of the model/copy. Mimicry performs its operations in the realm of the simulacrum” (86). In the erotically charged complicity between actor and audience, the gladiator’s compulsion is elided by a mutual desire for what Hart calls the “impossible-real, not the real of the illusion that passes for reality, but the Real that eludes symbolization,” an unpremeditated and unscripted encounter (91). As a spectacle of the “impossible reality” of restored honor,

the gladiator aims to please his masters by reproducing the free man's courage in the face of death (Barton, 1993:25-36). Yet should the gladiator fail to be sufficiently brave and fierce, the mask slips and his performance is revealed *as* a performance; he stands exposed as a scripted simulacrum of masculinity, bearing a resemblance to the valiant soldier that is "almost the same, but not quite" and unveiling the whole production to be both a sham and a shame (Barton, 1993:22-24).

Such constitutive gender instability inheres in the performance of Mark's male disciples as well. Returning to the conversation between Jesus and the Zebedees with which we began this section, we may now read Jesus' reinscription of "first" and "great" as an ambiguous mimicry of the masculinist and colonialist authority those accolades represent. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus reiterates the (implicitly colonialist) distinction between "tops" and "bottoms." Like all acts of imitation, however, Jesus' gesture is "almost the same, but not quite," troubling the stability of this hierarchal difference. Mimicry is closely aligned with hybridity in Bhabha's thought. He writes:

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power (112).

Mark, as I have been suggesting, repeats the devalued identity of the slave, reimplicating the slave's obedience and suffering in a "strategy of subversion" (cf. Bhabha, 1994: 112). Mark's replication of the visible signs of authority—"first" and "great"—thus splits their conventional meanings into "less than one and double" by introducing this slippage into the discourses of hegemonic masculinity and colonialism. Valorization of service and suffering as the path to authority produces an ambivalent masculine identification for the male disciple, as registered by the ambiguity surrounding the virtue of "endurance." Seneca may draw no distinction with respect to manliness between patiently enduring a siege and attacking the enemy (*Ep.* 66:12; Shaw, 1995:293), yet he does so only by transposing the "feminine," passive virtue into an active, public feat of strength (*Ep.* 78:15-19). Enduring persecution to the "end" (13:13) Mark's male disciple "takes it like a man" in a performance that always risks leaving him one step away from simply "being" a man (cf. Savran, 38).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tell us that "masculinity and femininity are threshold effects," by which she means "places where quantitative increments along one dimension can suddenly appear as qualitative differences somewhere else on the map entirely"(16). Portals of access to one's gender, that is, may pop up at the intersection of discourses that at first glance have little "to do" with gender at all. Mark's (male) disciples pass through a threshold framed by oppositions between slave/leader, last/first, suffering/glory, dying/saving, and colonizer/colonized. They emerge as subjects of a fractured masculinity that is unstable, though not ineffective. For Mark's reconfiguration of the masculine subject fails to question male privilege at a fundamental level. Though the women disciples who follow Jesus to the cross (15:40-41) alone exemplify the "service" that is the cardinal trait of leadership for Mark, twelve male disciples alone are addressed as would-be authorities in the community. Yet, as feminist scholars have noted, Mark's

uneven narrative attitude toward women also reveals faithful female followers whose actions interrupt what Bhabha describes as the “manifest destiny” of masculinity with designs and desires of their own (cf. 5:25-34; 7:24-30; 12:41-44; 14:3-9; 15:40-41). Mark’s desire for a “few good men” disavows the contradictions of the masculinity he constructs, and it is by tracing the effects of mimicry and hybridity in those contradictions that we continue to unveil masculinity’s ultimately “prosthetic reality” (Bhabha, 1995:57).