

Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. vi + 344. ISBN-13 978-0-521-856133. \$99.00/£60.00

A single literary source, Petronius's novel *Satyricon* and its central episode of the *Cena Trimalchiones*, has long supplied the dominant representation of the Roman freedman to modern interpreters. That representation is the vulgar *arriviste* with a "nouveau-riche" mentality, a parvenu obsessed with status. "The fictional Trimalchio and his dinner guests have in many respects become *the* representation of the freedman against which other evidence has been judged," writes Henrik Mouritsen (p. 280). This important study, the first on the topic to cover both republic and empire, brings a welcome corrective to such reading of ancient literary imagination as straightforward social description. Going beyond a mere "rehabilitation" of the figure, the primary aim of the study is "to explore the wider historical implications of such a revision for our understanding of Roman manumission and the freedman's place in society" (p. 5). The analysis is nothing short of revolutionary, an important advance over the standard studies: A. M. Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928); Susan Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen during the Late Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); G. Fabre, *Libertus: Recherches sur les rapports patron-affranchi à la fin de la République romaine* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981); and Wolfgang Waldstein, *Operae libertorum: Untersuchungen zur Dienstpflicht freigelassener Sklaven* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1986).

The book's method and approach ask "not whether status mattered to freedmen—that is a given—but whether it dominated their lives to the exclusion of all other concerns. ... It makes little sense to ascribe to all freedmen, irrespective of their education, profession, gender, or wealth, a single set of characteristics, mostly derived from the stereotype of the vulgar *arriviste* which is itself part of a specific Roman discourse on the relationship between wealth, power, and status" (p. 284). To that goal, the first chapter (Approaching Roman Freedmen) surveys the social, and even racial, stereotypes that have dominated past approaches to the figure. The "most notorious" example, writes Mouritsen, "remains Duff's still widely used monograph whose main thesis is the contention that race-mixture, following large-scale manumission of slaves, diluted the old Roman stock and eventually caused the fall of the Roman empire" (p. 2). Mouritsen shows how major studies in the field have willingly accepted at face value the ancient negative stereotype of the freedman; especially in the language most often used to describe manumission, previous scholars "have slipped into the mindset of Roman slave owners" (p. 3). In contrast, the approach here aims to separate questions about the "discourse" of the freedman and about the "reality" of the freedman, an important methodological distinction.

The next three chapters explore the cultural "construction" of the freedman in ancient Roman discourses of authority, dealing with the *macula servitutis* or "stain of slavery" (Chapter Two), the change in familial relationship with the former master, now the patron (Chapter Three), and the freedman's elevation to Roman citizenship (Chapter

Four). Mouritsen shows convincingly how “freedmen and empire” become closely linked “in the moral and political discourse of the principate” (p. 108), especially in the moral condemnation of *luxuria* (p. 117).

The pivotal Chapter Five turns from the “discourse” to the practice of manumission, with the goal of establishing a quantitative framework for understanding the scale and frequency of the phenomenon, which also attends to comparative slave studies. However, the demographic statistics produced to show “a solid majority of freedmen in funerary epigraphy” (p. 127) may rely too heavily on the questionable onomastic assumption about the so-called servile character of Greek *cognomina* in Rome and Italy, given the cultural heritage of *Magna Graecia* and the evidence of Greek freeborns (for example, St. Paul wrote to Rome in Greek). Nonetheless, Mouritsen makes a genuine contribution to a growing consensus among scholars that challenges Géza Alföldy’s famous study (“Die Freilassung von Sklaven und die Struktur der Sklaverei in der römischen Kaiserzeit,” in *Die römische Gesellschaft: Ausgewählte Beiträge* [Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1986], 286–331; first published in *RSA* 2 [1972], 97–129), which had claimed that virtually all slaves, at least in the cities, could expect to be freed by thirty years of age. With this caveat against Alföldy, Mouritsen agrees with most scholars that manumission was “both very common and very selective” (p. 140). Additionally, the chapter’s comparative approach makes claims about Rome’s uniqueness that are commonplace in ancient studies: “The fundamental difference between Rome and other slave societies such as Greece and South America lay in the slave’s unique status after manumission and the well documented expectation of continuous links between patron and freedman” (p. 180); and “The frequency of manumission automatically mitigated against the formation of any ‘class solidary’ among slaves” (p. 204).

Chapters Six and Seven then study the place of freedmen in Roman society, beginning with their economic roles particularly in urban contexts—focusing on the question whether the *seviri Augustales* can be called a “middle class” (an answer to John H. D’Arms, *Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome* [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981])—and ending with “the freedman’s son” in public life. In particular, Mouritsen questions “whether the strict polarity of ‘dependent’ and ‘independent’ is really useful” to describe Roman freedmen, because “an alternative model might argue that the richest freedmen were precisely those who enjoyed the greatest support” in patronage from their former masters (pp. 233–34). A repeated point is that the evidence of “independence provides no support for the ‘middle-class’ model, since freedmen did not form an alternative to the elite out of which they had emerged” (p. 243).

Among the book’s creative advances is to envision slavery as a dynamic social process of dishonor, alienation, and “social death” rather than as a static category of Roman private law, such as property. In this regard, Mouritsen helpfully applies the sociological insights of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982) in order to break from the law-oriented approach that has so often framed the academic debate previously (although Mouritsen corrects

Patterson in a number of broad generalizations and outright factual errors in regard to Roman culture and society). This “social death” model enables Mouritsen to argue that the Romans recognized manumission as “a maturation process” (p. 31), which helpfully explains the very precise prescriptions of indiscriminate manumission in the Augustan laws (e.g., the *lex fufia Caninia*). Although the Romans rejected essentialist definitions of “the natural slave” as found in Aristotle’s philosophy, they nonetheless still understood ex-slaves to remain “damaged” bodies of lowly servile nature (*servile ingenium, servilis animus*), against which free people of the highest orders “had to guard themselves” (p. 22). Mouritsen concludes, therefore, that “Augustus’ manumission laws were attempts to strengthen the privileged status of the Roman citizenship” (p. 91).

This social approach does not leave the Roman jurists out entirely. To be sure, citations of the *Digest* of Justinian and the *Institutes* of Gaius appear frequently in the footnotes, but they are used with the methodological control of finding corroborative evidence outside the legal sources. In this regard, the sixth chapter (“The Freedman in the Roman Economy”) is particularly strong and has perhaps the most controversial claim of the book. At issue are the so-called *operae libertorum*, specific work duties (*operae*) on service days, which manumitted Roman slaves in law owed their former master, now their patron. Mouritsen challenges the exhaustive study of the institution by Waldstein (cited above), which many consider definitive, for its unexamined presuppositions. “Outside the legal sources,” Mouritsen cautions, “the institution is virtually absent, a situation that Waldstein found puzzling. ... We are therefore confronted with a classic problem concerning the relationship between legal texts and lived reality” (pp. 224–25). Consequently, Mouritsen doubts the practice of *operae libertorum* as a formalized system in daily life: “In fact, we do not know of a single ‘real life’ relationship, whether actual or fictional, which was organized along those lines” (p. 225).

The book’s final chapter attempts to reconstruct the psychological experience of being a Roman freedman, which serves as an epilogue to the whole study. In attempting to penetrate into the psychological world of the freedman, especially feelings of “cognitive dissonance” (pp. 44, 111–12, 248), Mouritsen follows an approach championed by Keith Bradley (*Slavery and Society at Rome* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 181), but which other ancient historians have studiously avoided (M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* [New York: Viking Press, 1980], 117).

The chronology of the book spans from the early second century B.C.E. (the second Punic War) to the early third century C.E., a period during which the author finds no major changes to the practice of manumission. Geographically, the emphasis is on the city of Rome and Italy, although there is incorporation of material from other parts of the empire “where relevant” (p. 9). A disclaimer affirms the use of the term *freedman* “as convenient shorthand for both men and women, and unless otherwise stated it covers freed persons of either gender” (p. 1, n.1)—although the overall analysis considers woman and girls hardly at all. In fact, the study presumes the male gender of *freedmen*: “Their presumed inability to exercise power made them directly comparable to women, with whom they shared many attributed and characteristics as well as disabilities. The

power of women was as unacceptable as that of freedmen” (p. 100). More attention to gender differences among freed slaves would have given greater nuance on this important question.

As a side note, another new volume on the topic has also appeared, *Free at Last! The Impact of Freed Slaves on the Roman Empire*, ed. Sinclair Bell and Teresa R. Ramsby (London: Duckworth, 2011).

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