

Paradeigmata voluntatis

All'origine della concezione moderna di volontà

a cura di Elisabetta Cattanei e Stefano Maso

Is There a Male Will in Stoicism? The Case of Aggression

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Abstract Seneca characterises Stoicism as a philosophy for men. Stoic authors offer ample opportunities for a misogynist to feel validated, as Donna Zuckerberg (2018) shows. Focusing on Seneca's account of anger, I argue that references to hegemonic masculinity are a therapeutic device to address a cause for weakness of assent: agents' ignorance of their own strength and the erroneous belief that what they recognise as the right thing to do is too hard for them. However, the hypermasculine framing of this therapy is not essential. Stoic excellence is gender neutral. What is at stake is not manhood but maturity: that one comes to see one's innate strength and assumes responsibility for oneself.

Keywords Stoicism. Seneca. Weakness of assent (*asthenês sunkatathesis*). Masculinity. Anger.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Terminological Clarifications: 'Male' and 'Will'. – 3 No Gender Difference in Sages. – 4 The Sphere of Indifferents: Mars-Venus Model or Same-but-less Model? – 5 Status Anger as Characteristic of Males. – 6 Anger and Feminine Weakness. – 7 Weakness as Childish Immaturity.

1 Introduction

Seneca notoriously characterises Stoicism as a philosophy for the male of the species. Lady Philosophy will enroll you "among the men" in the city (*ep.* 4.2). The sage is a good man (*vir bonus*), not a good person. Imperial Stoic writers feature spirited young men and their manly role models, while looking down upon those soft, dim, and humble souls who in their lack of resilience and self-control re-



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semble women rather than members of their own sex. When choosing what is good for him, Seneca would prefer the heroism of a Mucius Scaevola, who

stood upright with no concern for foe or flames and calmly watched his own hand trickle drop by drop into the enemy's fire-pan.

Would he really want such a good, his interlocutor asks? Yes, he would:

Should I rather wish to extend a slender hand to my pet boys for a softening moisturizer? Should a cute little woman or someone turned into that from a man massage my tender fingers?¹

A large proportion of paraenetic Stoic discourse seems to consist in fostering a motivation to become a real man and assume one's role as the natural superior. No wonder that such texts appeal to the sexists of the so-called manosphere, as Donna Zuckerberg has recently shown in her monograph *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2018). She stresses the manosphere's myopic and distorted perspective on Stoicism. Nevertheless, as Zuckerberg also acknowledges, ancient Stoic texts offer ample opportunities for a misogynist to feel validated by what he reads.

In this paper I wish to argue that the Stoic discourse of manliness, in spite of its sexist and obsolete anthropology, allows for a different reading. The hypermasculine wailings of manosphere stars are a far cry removed even from the most patriarchic and sexist ideas of ancient Stoicism. Those individuals simply do not understand what a Stoic like Seneca means when he uses the word 'man'. It is the marker of therapeutic insights, some of which may be worth some attention even in a less parochial, modern context.

To illustrate this fact, I will focus on one trait consistently associated with being male, a key feature of so-called toxic masculinity:² excessive aggression, in particular aggression employed to dominate others.

1 Sen. ep. 66.51 *Stetit hostium flammaramque contemptor et manum suam in hostili foculo destillantem perspectavit*; 66.53 *An potius optem ut malaxandos articulos exoletis meis porrigam? ut muliercula aut aliquis in mulierculam ex viro versus digitulos meos ducat?* Seneca's *Epistulae morales* and *Dialogi* are quoted from Reynolds' edition (with a few changes in orthography). Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

2 'Toxic masculinity' is not a scientific term (Flood 2018). The American Psychological Association (APA 2018) speaks of negative aspects of 'traditional masculinity'. The expression does not describe men as dangerous; it points to harmful elements in gender stereotypes for men. Not men are bad, but such social constructs are 'poisonous', harming the wellbeing of both the male person and the community in which they occur.

Seneca's account of such behaviour will showcase how what, at first sight, seems to be a textbook case of raging hypermasculinity might not be conceived as particularly masculine at all. Rather, as I will argue, references to hegemonic masculinity are, most of all, a therapeutic device for treating one key reason of foolish, irrational behaviour caused by weakness of assent: an agent's ignorance of their own strength and the erroneous belief that what they recognise as the right thing to do is too hard for them. Framing therapeutic discourse in terms of traits attributed to the male sex is a contingent feature of *ancient* Stoic philosophy and not essential to the Stoic system of thought. The misogynist frame results from ancient Stoicism's entanglement in a patriarchic society. What is at stake is not manhood but maturity. A person wishing to make moral progress must come to see their own innate power and resilience; they must realise that they are capable of taking responsibility for themselves, and then assume that responsibility.

2 Terminological Clarifications: 'Male' and 'Will'

So what *is* a Stoic man? In this paper, I will not attempt the tricky distinction of sex and gender and all the complex terminological shades in between. The words 'man' and 'male' will refer *both* to what belongs to the masculine sex, as manifested in characteristic features of people with XY-chromosomes, and what belongs to the prevalent hegemonic masculinity of the time, i.e. the gender as a social and psychological category. Disregarding this important distinction is possible since Stoics did not distinguish between gender and sex and, as social naturalists and psychological materialists (or rather corporealists), would not have had a reason to do so. For them, this distinction dissolves into the categories of natural and unnatural.

While the term 'male' will thus be used in a wide sense, I will instead narrow down the question by focusing on intentional agency and ask whether there is a specifically 'male will' in Stoicism and Seneca, the primary source for this paper. The Stoics did not acknowledge any separate faculty of 'will'.³ Their psychology acknowledges impulse generating impressions, impulse (*hormē*), and impulse turned into action by the agent's giving and upholding their assent (*sunkatathesis*). Some Stoic sources (and among them Seneca at the beginnings of *ep.* 92 and *De ira*, book 2) also acknowledge non-cognitive causes of physiological reactions and involuntary reflexes as well as physiological drivers of dispositions to act, but an action in the proper sense requires assent, an uninterrupted intention-in-ac-

³ Wildberger 2006, ch. 3.3.4.9.

tion, as it were. Among the rational action impulses maintained by the agent's continued assent, there are further distinctions, e.g. *orexis* or reaching, the impulse directed toward an apparent good, and its opposite, *ekklisis*, the recoiling from apparent bads.

These assented-to impulses are what one might call the 'volitions' of a human being and that which is frequently rendered with the word *voluntas* by Seneca. Yet another type of impulse that Seneca translates with *voluntas* and other words as well has given rise to the idea that in Seneca we see the origin of a faculty of will. It is *epibolē* (impulse before an impulse) which, I have argued,⁴ is the genus of impulse to which belong as species (a) the erotic impulse or reasonable *erōs* of a sage, an effort to make friends (*epibolē philopoiias*), and (b) the impulse of a true progressor to become good (as we also find it in *Epictetus' Diatribes*). It is an impulse aimed at a value that is contingent and not (yet) good in the full sense of the word and thus an object of impulse not suitable for a full-blown willing (*boulēsis*), a well-reasoned reaching for what is good, even though the object warrants a very strong impulse. In his conception of progressor friendship, Seneca combines these two *epibolai*, that of the progressor to become a good person and thus also capable of true friendship and the impulse of the sage to relate to someone who, eventually, may become a sage too and thus a true friend. As a result, what sometimes is seen as a nascent concept of "will" in Seneca is nothing but a very strong, pushy action impulse toward something really important but not (yet) a good.

3 No Gender Difference in Sages

This Stoic psychology of action, especially in its early form, does not provide evidence for a specifically male variant of volition. The definition of the good and the good life as agreement and of virtue (a disposition in agreement) as following God or good flow⁵ are not gendered. On the contrary, we have evidence that the Stoics regarded both women and men as capable of attaining virtue. In *Zeno's Politeia*, these male and female sages will direct their *erōs* at all those in whom they see the signs of a good natural disposition (*euphuia*) to attain virtue.⁶ Clement of Alexandria gives us Zeno's description of such good looks in a passage outlining the proper behaviour and outward appearance of a real man. All the more is it striking that Zeno,

⁴ For evidence and further details, see Wildberger 2018a.

⁵ D.L. 7.87-9.

⁶ Wildberger 2018b, 108-10.

who had a reputation for not being sexually interested in women,⁷ uses quirky noun phrases such that the gender of the described individual is not recognizable:

The countenance be pure; the brow not relaxed; the eye not wide open nor half-closed; the neck not thrown back; nor the limbs of the body relaxed, but keyed up like strings under tension; the ear cocked for *logos*; sharpness and clinging to what has been said correctly; and bearings and movement giving no hope to the licentious. All be crowned by the flower of modesty and a manly look, but away with the excitement of perfumer's shops and goldsmiths and wool shops – and indeed all the other shops where they spend the whole day adorned like courtesans, as though sitting in a brothel.⁸

In spite of this gender neutrality, whether the beautiful talent is male or female, their attractiveness will include a “manly look” (ἀρρενωπία). Here we see a first example of the paradoxical marriage between sexist patriarchic stereotypes and a, for that time, radical egalitarianism. Even if objects of *orexis* and *epibolē*, the good and what prepares for attaining it, may be the same for men and women, there could still be significant differences as to what this means in practice. Scholars have, rightly, pointed to scores of examples of sexist language in the ancient Stoics and many conclude, again rightly to my mind, that Stoics were by no means feminists, neither in the sense that they would reject sexist views themselves nor in the sense that they would promote political action to address sexist discrimination.⁹

⁷ D.L. 7.13.

⁸ Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.11.74.3 f. = *SVF* 1.246 “ἔστω”, φησί, “καθαρὸν τὸ πρόσωπον, ὀφρὺς μὴ καθειμένη, μηδὲ ὄμμα ἀναπεπταμένον μηδὲ ἀνακεκλασμένον, μὴ ὕπτιος ὁ τράχηλος μηδὲ ἀνιέμενα τὰ τοῦ σώματος μέλη, ἀλλὰ [τὰ] μετέωρα ἐντόνοις ὅμοια, ὀρθὸν οὐς πρὸς τὸν λόγον, ὀξύτης καὶ κατοκωχὴ τῶν ὀρθῶς εἰρημένων, καὶ σχηματισμοὶ καὶ κινήσεις μηδὲν ἐνδιδοῦσαι τοῖς ἀκολάστοις ἐλπίδος. Αἰδῶς μὲν ἐπανθείτω καὶ ἀρρενωπία ἀπέστω δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν μυροπωλίων καὶ χρυσοχοείων καὶ ἐριτοπωλίων ἄλυσ καὶ ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἐργαστηρίων, ἔνθα ἐταιρικῶς κεκοσμημένοι ὡσπερ <αἱ> ἐπὶ τέγους καθεζόμενοι διημερεύουσι”. The translation has been adapted from Schofield 1991, 115-18 = Appendix C. Schofield athetises ὀξύτης καὶ κατοκωχὴ τῶν ὀρθῶς εἰρημένων. There is only one masculine plural form: κεκοσμημένοι, which is suitable for comprising both male and female referents, and the persons such characterised are compared to female prostitutes (καθεζόμενοι) if the text has been transmitted correctly. Even if it is uncertain how much of the original words have been retained in Clement, the lack of masculine forms is unusual and thus likely to have come into the text from Zeno's original version.

⁹ See, e.g., Mauch 1997; Graver 1998; Hill 2001; Nussbaum 2002; Engel 2003; Aikin, McGill-Rutherford 2014; Zuckerberg 2018.

4 The Sphere of Indifferents: Mars-Venus Model or Same-but-less Model?

The Stoic good life consists in agreeing both with the Nature of all and one's own nature. These two natures provide affordances and motivations, determining what is *oikeion*, i.e. what belongs to that individual in question, and the action-targets that suit each particular person as their *kathekonta* in each particular situation. If the good life amounts to consistently making the right choices about what is suitable, as the Middle Stoics explained,¹⁰ then the Stoic good, as it is *implemented in practice*, may very well become deeply gendered, as it appears, e.g., in Musonius' infamous discourses 3 and 4 about teaching women philosophy and their capacity for virtue. So, were motivations at this level thought to differ fundamentally between men and women, such that there would be a male nature and a female nature, each with different *oikeia* and *kathekonta*?

Here I would like to distinguish two ways of constructing what is male and what is female, in other words, two different ways in which the Stoics may have conceptualised the difference between the nature of a man and the nature of a woman: one is what I will call the Mars-Venus model most popular in our societies today. The term alludes to John Gray's bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (HarperCollins 1992). The Mars-Venus model posits that the sexes are fundamentally different kinds. In addition to differences in sex-specific physiology, which that model tends to exaggerate and conceptualise in an antithetic manner, the Mars-Venus model attributes fundamentally different mental properties, different needs, and different ways to interact with others. Another model is what I will call the same-but-less model, which assumes that beyond the basic physiology of their respective sex, which is often framed in terms of gradation and similarity, men and women do *not* have fundamentally different mental traits or faculties. According to this model, men and women express the same traits, but do so in different degrees. A famous ancient example of this view is Socrates' claim about women in Plato's *Republic*, that they are capable of the same achievements as men, only, of course, less so than men.

Both models can be used to argue for equality or inequality. While Aristotle, a proponent of the same-but-less model, distinguishes the mental capacities of men and women by degree, placing women above some men (the so-called natural slaves), he insists that women's rationality is too weak for them to take full care of themselves so that they need a husband or male guardian.¹¹ Plato's Socrates, on the oth-

¹⁰ See, e.g., D.L. 7.88.

¹¹ See, e.g., Föllinger 1996; Yates 2015.

er hand, famously claims that in spite of their inferior talent women can reach the rank of a guardian of the *polis*, and the Stoics agreed, even the much more socially conservative Roman Stoics, including Musonius. There is evidence, collected by Robert Bees (2011), that the Early Stoics were even more egalitarian in their views than Plato. On the other side of the same-but-less scale, one could also construct an argument according to which the female sex is primary, the male being a deficient variation and thus men inferior to women. Proponents of the Mars-Venus model can either posit one of the two sexes as superior to the other, by ascribing more valuable properties to them, or claim that both sexes are different but equal in worth, each worthy in their own way.¹²

There is no indication, rather the opposite, that the Early Stoics envisaged fundamentally different gender roles in their descriptions of an ideal state.¹³ The later Stoics were more socially conservative, and their accounts of role-specific suitable behaviour does not suggest that traditional social roles or hierarchies were called into question. Seneca, for example, does not question the institution of slavery and the resulting behavioural rules – all the while acknowledging the full human agency of slaves, confronting cruelty of masters, and distinguishing social from moral slavery.

But do these acknowledged differences in social roles reflect acknowledged differences in natural, innate motivation? Seneca explicitly rejects this for slaves (*ep.* 47). As concerns women, the matter is more complicated. At the beginning of *De constantia sapientis*, for example, Seneca claims that both sexes make the same contribution to communal life, each in their own way: women are *born* to obey, men are born to command.¹⁴ The philosophical schools he characterises as effeminate and contrasts with manly Stoicism in this passage treat their adherents softly, and in *De providentia* (2.5) women tend to pamper their children, while fathers challenge their sons. In a diatribe about women who embrace vices traditionally reserved for men and, as a consequence, contract male ailments such as baldness, Seneca describes women as *pati natae*, born to be the recipients in sexual intercourse (*ep.* 95.21). These examples point to the Mars-Venus model.

On the other hand, there is also a lot of evidence for the same-but-less model. Although their behaviour and interests are shaped by their peculiar social condition and the sex of their body, the range of

¹² Compare Plumwood 1993, ch. 2, where both hyperseparation and incorporation are forms of defining a hierarchy within a dualistic pair, such as male and female.

¹³ Bees 2011; Wildberger 2018b, 100 f.

¹⁴ *Dial.* 2.1.1 *cum utraque turba ad uitae societatem tantundem conferat, sed altera pars ad obsequendum, altera imperio nata sit.*

women's motivations appears similar in kind to that of men. Women get involved in politics to support their male family members, and Seneca regards this as laudable, as long as their actions are motivated by selfless interest for the other and conform with the norms of how a woman should behave in Roman society.¹⁵ A woman who lobbies for her children is laudable; blameworthy are those

who employ the power of their children with a feminine lack of self-control; who, barred from public office because they are women, fulfill their ambitions through their sons; who both deplete and seek the heritage of their sons; who have them speak cases for others to exhaustion. (*dial.* 12.14.2)

Similar criteria distinguish a man's service for his community. In both cases, ambition is the perversion of the altruistic use of one's influence and resources: the ambitious man aims at self-aggrandisement, the ambitious woman abuses her sons for the same purpose. Both men and women can show an interest in business matters: a virtuous woman like Helvia manages the estates of her sons and enjoys her wealth as a means for generosity toward them (*dial.* 12.14.2); like the greedy man, a vicious woman seeks riches only for herself.

Women's prime virtue is chastity, but women can be sexual predators too (like the women of *ep.* 95), while men's restraint in sexual matters is strongly recommended as well. Seneca praises his mother saying that, unlike other women, she never had an abortion (*dial.* 12.16.3). However, he does not frame this as a desire for childbirth, but rather as proud acceptance of a natural bodily feature, her fecundity, and contrasts her with women who wish to maintain their sexual attractiveness. Excessive care of the body, luxurious garments and jewelry are all interests that we would nowadays regard as typically feminine, so much so that a special term, 'metrosexual',¹⁶ was invented for men who like to adorn themselves. Seneca, however, describes such behaviour in women and in men (think of the gentlemen at the hairdresser's in *De brevitate vitae* 12.3), and he criticises it in both: a man shouldn't wear make-up, nor does Helvia (*dial.* 12.16.4). Generally, the problem consists in tampering with one's natural physiology and giving too much attention to one's body in contrast to the more valuable things in life.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gloy 2017, ch. 1.

¹⁶ "A man (esp. a heterosexual man) whose lifestyle, spending habits and concern for personal appearance are likened to those considered typical of a fashionable, urban, homosexual man". *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2020, s.v. "metrosexual", www.oed.com/view/Entry/263156.

Even though love of children is not named as Helvia's key reason for rejecting an abortion, the women that receive Seneca's praise appear as extremely caring about her family - but so does Seneca present himself too, at least in his consolation to his mother. Like chastity, women's concern for their family is just more prominent because their scope of agency precludes many of the other forms of social excellence available to men. The modern cliché of the tender, nourishing, caring mother does not quite fit the image of the stern Roman Mother portrayed by Susan Dixon in her important book.¹⁷ What is more, there is a dogmatic reason why parental love or greater social skills in general could hardly be regarded as the prerogative of women. In the Stoic system, sociability is no less essential and intrinsic to human and divine nature than rationality, and in both respects humans excel over other animals. Evidence for this sociability is seen in our natural love for "those whom we have generated". If women had more of that love than men, it would be an indication that they are superior to men in the divine trait of sociability.¹⁸

5 Status Anger as Characteristic of Males

So what about assertiveness and aggression, the personality trait most consistently associated with the male sex and gender today? A natural propensity toward dominance appears as a masculine trait also in the passage from *De constantia* cited before as possible evidence for the Mars-Venus model. Among ancient psychologist, aggression and dominance are associated with what Aristotle called *thumos* and its ancestor, Plato's *thumoeides*. A similar faculty appears in Seneca's 92nd *Letter*. He distinguishes two parts of the irrational part of the mind, of which one is "spirited, full of ambition, indomitable, responsible for aspirations". In contrast to this, the other part, which corresponds to *epithumia* or *epithumētikon*, is "lowly, forceless" and "given to pleasure". Of these, Seneca describes the aggressive, dominant part as "better and more worthy of a man" than the flaccid and submissive pleasure part.¹⁹ In *De ira* 2.19 Seneca provides a physiological explanation for aggressiveness that connects well to the Aristotelian definition of anger as blood heating up around the heart, which actually occurs in that passage without ref-

¹⁷ Dixon 1988.

¹⁸ Cic. *fn.* 3.62 f. = *SVF* 3.340; Wildberger 2018b, ch. 3.2.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 92.8 *Irrationalis pars animi duas habet partes, alteram animosam, ambitiosam, impotentem, positam in affect-<at>ionibus, alteram humilem, languidam, uoluptatibus deditam: illam effrenatam, meliorem tamen, certe fortiolem ac digniorem viro, reliquerunt, hanc necessariam beatae vitae putaverunt, enervem et abiectam.* (I suggest reading *affectationibus* instead of the transmitted *affectationibus*).

erence to an author.²⁰ A prevalence of the element fire makes people irascible, and this is characteristic of men, young men in particular, while women have a wet nature.

A connection between manhood and anger was explicitly made in the Aristotelean tradition. At least the Peripatetic opponents of the Stoic view in Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes*, who argue that anger is useful and natural, rejected leniency, calling it sluggishness. Someone unable to become angry did not seem to be a man to them.²¹ In one of Plutarch's dialogues challenging the idea that a certain measure of anger is desirable, the speaker rejects what is presented as a widespread view: that anger is noble and manly and characterised by spirited greatness.²²

Plutarch explicitly mentions only the many (*hoi polloi*) as those holding such a mistaken view, but the connection between anger and status is apparent also in Aristotle's own cognitive definition in the *Rhetoric* as "a desire accompanied by distress, directed at retribution because of an apparent act of disrespect against the angry person or something in his sphere, this disrespect being inappropriate".²³ David Konstan (2003, 114) explains:

Aristotle envisages a world in which self-esteem depends on social interaction: the moment someone's negative opinion of your worth is actualised publicly in the form of a slight, you have lost credit, and the only recourse is a compensatory act that restores your social position. Anger is just the desire to adjust the record in this way – the internal correlative to the outward loss of respect.

Aristotle thus combines the two 'paths' of anger distinguished by Martha Nussbaum (2016), the "path of retribution" and the "path of status".

Seneca too thematises status anger and repeatedly points to its function not to mete out just punishment but to raise the social standing of the one showing anger or cruelty. Very often status anger is displayed by masters toward their slaves. A striking example of this occurs in his famous letter on how to treat one's slaves:

20 Sen. *De ira* 2.19.3; Arist. *de an.* 1, 403a31; Fillion-Lahille (1984, 183) argues that the source for this passage, including Aristotle's definition, is Posidonius.

21 Cic. *Tusc.* 4.43 *virum denique videri negant qui irasci nesciet, eamque, quam lenitatem nos dicimus, vitioso lentitudinis nomine appellant.*

22 Plu. *De cohib. ira* 456f ὡς οὐκ εὐγενῆς οὐδ' ἀνδρώδης οὐδ' ἔχουσα φρόνημα καὶ μέγεθος ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ δοκεῖ τοῖς πολλοῖς τὸ ταρακτικὸν αὐτοῦ πρακτικὸν καὶ τὸ ἀπειλητικὸν εὐθαρσές εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀπειθές ἰσχυρόν.

23 Arist. *Rhet.* 2.2, 1378a30-2 Ἔστω δὴ ὀργὴ ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας διὰ φαινομένην ὀλιγωρίαν εἰς αὐτὸν ἢ <τι> τῶν αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ὀλιγωρεῖν μὴ προσήκοντος.

We put on the airs of kings. They too forget their own power and the weakness of the other: they explode, rage with a cruelty as if they had suffered an injustice – a danger from which the greatness of their fortunes keeps them perfectly safe.²⁴

An exemplary victim of this kind of anger in Seneca's tragedies is Atreus, who measures his greatness by the outrageousness of the atrocities he commits.²⁵ Like some men in Plutarch's dialogue *On Anger*, Atreus confuses "bestiality with the performance of great deeds".²⁶ Apparently sharing the views of the Peripatetics in *Tusc.* 4.43, he despises his own sluggishness, his empty complaints, that he has not yet taken revenge for all the crimes committed by his brother. If he really is a king, then the whole world, by land and by sea, should resound from warfare, fields burning and cities devastated by his armies.²⁷ Only after he has butchered his nephews with his own hands, is he able to acknowledge his own status. In his pride he seems to be walking among the stars, the heaven has become too low for him.²⁸

After a long time, I reread this play with students in Paris. Not even half a year had passed since the Bataclan massacre, and it was in that very week, in March 2016, that the Brussels attacks happened. I was struck by the parallels between Atreus and such terrorism. Why would anyone glory in committing such deeds if not because they feel particularly small and unhappy inside. My intuition at that time is confirmed by the research of Adam Lankford, who argues that mass shooters and Islamist suicide terrorists share a common profile. This profile is similar to Seneca's dramatic portrayal of status anger. Lankford describes a profile with three characteristic features.

The first is "life indifference". The perpetrators "have suicidal motives" and "do not care about their self-preservation, survival, or future" (2018, 472). Seneca's Atreus is not suicidal, but someone who

24 Ep. 47.2 *Regum nobis induimus animos; nam illi quoque oblitī et suarum virium et inbecillitatis alienae sic excalescunt, sic saevīunt, quasi iniuriam acceperint, a cuius rei periculo illos fortunae suae magnitudo tutissimos praestat.*

25 Wildberger 2020.

26 Plu. *De cohib. ira* 465f ἐνίοι δὲ καὶ τὴν ὀμότητα μεγαλοῦργίαν [...] οὐκ ὀρθῶς τίθενται.

27 Sen. *Thy.* 176-84 *Ignaue, iners, eneruis et, quod maximum | probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor, | inulte! Post tot scelera, post fratris dolos | fasque omne ruptum questibus uanis agis | iratus Atreus? fremere iam totus tuis | debebat armis orbis et geminum mare | utrimque classes agere, iam flammis agros | lucere et urbes decuit ac strictum undique | micare ferrum.*

28 Sen. *Thy.* 885-8 *Aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super | altum superbo uertice attingens polum. | Nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris. | Dimitto superos: summa uotorum attigi.*

deeply devalues himself and his life. He is full of self-contempt and cannot enjoy his now uncontested rule over a powerful kingdom.

The second feature is “perceived victimization” (473):

the adversity or inequities could be real, but the perceptions of conspiracies against them and malicious persecution or oppression might be wildly exaggerated. In the most extreme cases, offenders’ perceptions might be so distorted that their alleged victimization is largely a product of their own thoughts.

Atreus suffered great injustice from his brother. The “adversity or inequity” in his case was real. However, by now he has driven Thyestes into exile, deprived him of rank and wealth, and sits firmly on his inherited throne. Whatever he has suffered, does not warrant the flagrant world war with all those innocent victims that he envisages nor the atrocities committed in the play.

Atreus also shares the third commonality of suicide mass killers. He is driven by a mad version of status anger. Atreus wants to take a revenge that is spectacular, unheard of, and after committing the deed believes his status restored, fantasises himself among and even above the gods in heaven. This corresponds to the third feature of suicide killers and mass shooters identified by Lankford: a “desire for attention or fame” (473 f.):

[Lankford counts] 24 cases of [mass shooters] who explicitly stated that they wanted attention and fame or directly contacted media organizations to get it. [...] these fame-seekers were not representative of the average mass shooter, but rather of the most deadly offenders [...]. This makes sense, because some mass shooters are exploiting the direct relationship between casualty counts and media coverage. As the Umpqua Community College shooter accurately summarised, “Seems the more people you kill, the more you’re in the limelight”

[Similarly, suicide terrorists] attempt to compensate for feeling underappreciated by doing something dramatic that will get them recognised [...] terrorist organizations often employ recruiting and radicalization strategies that are specifically designed to capitalise on this desire for personal attention. By producing martyrdom videos, murals, calendars, keychains, posters, postcards, and pennants with the names and photos of past suicide terrorists, they show potential participants that committing a suicide attack is a path to fame and glory.

Coming from a different perspective, psychologist Michael Kimmel connects status anger with masculinity. He argues that gender is a driver of extremist violence that should not be underestimated. To quote from the summary of his book on Kimmel's website:²⁹

white extremist groups wield masculinity to recruit and retain members - and prevent members from exiting the movement. These young men feel a sense of righteous indignation, seeing themselves as victims in a world suddenly dominated by political correctness. Their birthright has been upended, they say - and violent extremist groups leverage masculinity to manipulate the men's despair into white supremacist and neo-Nazi hatred, all to "take their manhood back".

Here again we find a combination of low self-esteem, perceived victimisation, and the idea that violence provides, or rather restores, the high status that the violent individuals regard as their and their social group's natural position in the world.

6 Anger and Feminine Weakness

In contrast to Kimmel's claims, however, Lankford's profile is not gendered. Even though the majority of cases studied are crimes committed by men, he applies the same profile to female suicide mass killers. And here, again, Seneca's analysis is closer to Lankford's non-gendered version; in fact, he inverts the gender balance. Not only Atreus, but female characters as well, most notably Iuno in the prologue of the play *Hercules furens*, display status anger turning into fury, and Iuno's affect is clearly status anger deriving from low self-esteem, perceived victimisation, and an attempt to restore her fame through self-destructive atrocities.³⁰

At the end of the first book of *De ira*, in chapter 20, Seneca replies to the objection that anger is a source of greatness in terms very similar to the discussion in Plutarch's *On Anger* already cited.³¹ Both authors diagnose a weakness, a sickly swelling of a soft, wounded soul. It is for this reason, both authors claim, that women are more irascible than men:

²⁹ "New book coming Feb 2018: Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out of - Violent Extremism", 13 September 2017, <http://www.michaelkimmel.com/>.

³⁰ Wildberger 2020.

³¹ There is certainly more to be said about the parallels between *De ira* 1.20 and Plu. *De cohib. ira* 456e-457b, which may, or may not, point to a common Stoic source. See Fillion-Lahille 1984, 189 f., who, however, does not discuss *De ira* 1.20.

Just as a swelling is the effect [*pathos*] of a big flesh wound, so it happens also in the softest souls: Giving way to distressful stimuli brings forth a larger aggressive impulse [*thumos*] as the consequence of greater weakness. This is also why women are more irascible than men [...].³²

For this is not greatness. It's a swelling. Nor does a large collection of festering fluid constitute growth in a bloated body; it is a malignant inundation. [...] The irascible mind does not undertake anything of distinction or splendor. On the contrary, to me it seems characteristic of a sluggish mind expecting failure and aware of its own weakness to sense pain so frequently, like a sick body raw with sores that cries out at the lightest touch. So anger is most of all a fault of women and children.³³

According to this analysis aggression and dominance behaviour are not properties peculiar to the male of the species. The aggressive part of what is irrational in the mind, the Middle Stoic equivalent to the Platonic *thumoeides* and Aristotle's *thumos*, may be more manly than the part that goes for pleasure. But women have *both* parts of the irrational too. Similarly, the elementary properties, at least if conceived according to Stoic physics, are just different degrees of expansion and contraction. Fiery and watery souls have more or less contracted forms of *pneuma*, the watery ones closer to the *phusis* of plants and fetuses and the fiery souls closer to the even purer fire of the heavens and the stars.³⁴

That anger is a sign of insecurity is a folk psychological commonplace.³⁵ What is not commonplace, at least not in our time, is the connection of such aggressive weakness with the weaker sex. It makes sense, though, from a Stoic perspective. If women are inferior to men according to the same-but-less model, it is because they embody the properties characteristic of any human being to a lesser degree. And the same properties distinguish the perfect human being from an irascible individual.

32 Plu. *De cohib. ira* 457a-b ὥς γὰρ οἴδημα μεγάλης ἐστὶν ἐν σαρκὶ πληγῆς πάθος, οὕτως ἐν ταῖς μαλακωτάταις 457b ψυχαῖς ἢ πρὸς τὸ λυπηῖσθαι ἔνδοσις ἐκφέρει μείζονα θυμὸν ἀπὸ μείζονος ἀσθενείας. διὸ καὶ γυναῖκες ἀνδρῶν ὀργιλώτεραι.

33 Sen. *De ira* 20.2-3 *Non est enim illa magnitudo: tumor est; nec corporibus copia uitiosi umoris intentis morbus incrementum est sed pestilens abundantia. [...] Iracundia nihil amplum decorumque molitur; contra mihi uidetur ueternosi et infelicis animi, inbecillitatis sibi conscii, saepe indolescere, ut exulcerata et aegra corpora quae ad tactus leuissimos gemunt. Ita ira muliebre maxime ac puerile uitium est. 'At incidit et in uiros.' Nam uiris quoque puerilia ac muliebria ingenia sunt.*

34 Wildberger 2006, chs. 1.4, 3.1.3.11-12.

35 A more scientific account of the phenomenon reminiscent of Cicero's *Peripatetics in Tusc.* 4.43 is the "Fear of Deviance and Overperforming Masculinity" with aggressive behaviour described by Rudman and Glick (2008, 149 f.).

What characterises the irascible person is the opposite of the greatness of soul. Such greatness comes from a rational insight that evaluates correctly what is truly good and bad. It is the knowledge that indifferents are indifferents which provides a person with the mental loftiness to look down upon what can happen to both fools and sages.³⁶ Those seeking greatness through aggression are confused about what makes a person tower above others:

There will be no doubt that he will stand high above the crowd from which he distinguishes himself who looks down upon those trying to attack him. It is characteristic of true greatness not even to feel the blows.³⁷

Anger, Seneca argues, is an error in judgment, a symptom of ignorance about what is truly glorious.³⁸ Irascible persons make themselves small by judging external things to be more powerful than themselves. This is why their arrogance is hollow, just noise erupting from a timid mind:

It is from there, I claim, that your anger and madness arises: that you attribute great value to minute things.

even though [the angry person's] outrage originates in excessive self-esteem - and maybe it seems spirited to you - it is small-minded and narrow.

There is no reason to believe the words of those in anger. Their clamor is loud and menacing, but the mind inside is terrified.³⁹

36 Ar. Did. Stob. 2.7.5b2, p. 61 = SVF 3.264 μεγαλοψυχίαν δὲ ἐπιστήμην ὑπεράνω ποιοῦσαν τῶν πεφυκότων ἐν σπουδαίοις τε γίνεσθαι καὶ φαύλοις (compare also 2.7.5b, p. 58 = SVF 3.95, where this virtue is a disposition, not a knowledge); D.L. 7.93 = SVF 3.265 τὴν δὲ μεγαλοψυχίαν ἐπιστήμην <ἧ> ἔξιν ὑπεράνω ποιοῦσαν τῶν συμβαινόντων κοινῇ φαύλων τε καὶ σπουδαίων; Cic. *Off.* 1.14 = Panaetius Frg. 98 van Straaten, 55 Allesse *magnitudo animi [...] humanarumque rerum contemptio*.

37 Sen. *De ira* 3.25.3 *Illud non veniet in dubium, quin se exemerit turbae et altius steterit quisquis despexit lacessentis: proprium est magnitudinis verae non sentire percussum*.

38 Interestingly, Lankford and Silver (2020, 41) identify a similar error as one of the causes why mass shootings in the US are becoming increasingly lethal: “the distinction between fame and infamy seems to be disappearing”.

39 Sen. *De ira* 3.34.2 *Inde, inquam, uobis ira et insania est, quod exigua magno aestimatis*; 3.5.7 *Adice quod, cum indignatio eius a nimio sui suspectu ueniat, ut animosa uideatur, pusilla est et angusta; nemo enim non eo a quo se contemptum iudicat minor est*; 1.20.5 *Non est quod credas irascentium verbis, quorum strepitus magni, minaces sunt, intra mens pavidissima*.

Another error of the irascible mind is its misunderstanding of human nature. In a chapter unique to ancient literature on anger, Seneca underscores the loving, caring, generous nature of the human being (*De ira* 1.5). Anger, he argues, cannot be natural because it is an inversion of what a person is supposed to be. Humans are not only rational like the divine; they also share God's essential sociability more than all other animals on Earth. They are the animal that is by nature *both* rational *and* sociable (*koinōnikon*).⁴⁰ Accordingly, greatness can only occur in conjunction with goodness, both in the sense of perfect rationality and the *bonitas* that motivates God to make a world with humans to be their friend and fellow citizen.⁴¹ Both cannot be separated:

Either something will be good or not great either since, as I understand it, greatness of mind is unshaken and massive inside, everywhere the same and firm from bottom to top, such as cannot occur in a bad character.⁴²

The angry person's sociability is as underdeveloped as is their reason. They cannot see themselves as generous caretakers and appraise stimuli incorrectly. Both these weaknesses amount to a lack of mental muscle, tension, and resolve. Irascible people are soft and easily hurt:

But that boundless mind which is a true judge of its own worth will not retaliate an injury because it does not feel it. As a weapon bounces back from the hard surface, as hacking at some massive material only hurts the one administering the blow, just so can no injury bring a great mind to feel it. It is more vulnerable than what it attacks.⁴³

Anger is a species of weak assent in both senses: assent is given out of weakness and collapses out of weakness.⁴⁴ The great mind is mild and friendly. "All aggressive brutishness arises from weakness".⁴⁵ Angry persons lack the certain knowledge and unfailing judgment

⁴⁰ Wildberger 2006, ch. 3.2.2.3; 2018b, 3.2.1.

⁴¹ Wildberger 2018b, chs. 3.2.2, 6.2.2; *Sen. ep.* 65.10, quoting Plato's *Timaeus* (29d).

⁴² *Sen. De ira* 20.6 *Non potest istud separari: aut et bonum erit aut nec magnum, quia magnitudinem animi inconcussam intellego et introrsus solidam et ab imo parem firmamque, qualis inesse malis ingeniis non potest.*

⁴³ *Sen. De ira* 3.5.7-8 *At ille ingens animus et verus aestimator sui non vindicat iniuriam, quia non sentit. Ut tela a duro resiliunt et cum dolore caedentis solida feriuntur, ita nulla magnum animum iniuria ad sensum sui adducit, fragilior eo quod petit.*

⁴⁴ Görler 1977; Wildberger 2021, 77-9.

⁴⁵ *Sen. dial.* 7.3.4 *tum pax et concordia animi et magnitudo cum mansuetudine; omnis enim ex infirmitate feritas est.*

that rejects passion stimuli but persists once it has given assent to an action impulse. Angry persons fail to recognise their own value, the strength of their human nature. They do not see how close they are to the divine and what being godlike consists in. Their souls are soft, sickly, hollow, small, and weak. Now, weakness is characteristic of the female soul,⁴⁶ and so is anger:

Raging anger is a feminine trait.⁴⁷

However, it is also characteristic of the childish soul, as we learned in *De ira* 1.20.3. Both boys and women have a wetter soul; thus they are more irascible, but their anger is also lighter.⁴⁸ Replying to an objection by Theophrastus that one would expect a man to become angry when his parents are being maltreated, Seneca distinguishes between the weak impulse of anger and truly caring for one's family. When someone faints because a dear one undergoes surgery, this is not care and love (*pietas*) but feminine weakness (1.12.2). Similarly, when boys cry for a lost parent, it happens because of the same weakness that makes them cry when they have lost a toy (1.12.4).⁴⁹

7 Weakness as Childish Immaturity

The status anger of inflated pseudo-greatness is thus most of all a defect of women and children. "Why, then, are there so many male examples of this vice?", someone might ask, and so does Seneca's interlocutor. The answer is simple:

Men can have a feminine and childish character too.⁵⁰

All the things that make a man burn with anger are childish affairs (*De ira* 3.32.3: *puerilia*). The sage on the other hand, does not get angry with fools because he sees nothing but imprudent boys.

⁴⁶ *Dial.* 6.1.1 *Nisi te, Marcia, scirem tam longe ab infirmitate muliebris animi quam a ceteris vitiis recessisse*; see also *dial.* 2.10.3 *ingenia natura infirma et muliebria*.

⁴⁷ *Sen. clem.* 1.5.5 *Muliebre est furere in ira*.

⁴⁸ *Sen. De ira* 2.19.4 *puerorum feminarumque acres magis quam graves sunt levioresque dum incipiunt*.

⁴⁹ *Sen. De ira* 1.12.1 *Aut dic eodem modo: 'quid ergo? cum videat secari patrem suum filiumve, vir bonus non flebit nec linquetur animo?' Quae accidere feminis videmus, quotiens illas levis periculi suspicio perculit; 1.12.4 *Non pietas illam iram sed infirmitas mouet, sicut pueri, qui tam parentibus amissis flebunt quam nucibus*.*

⁵⁰ *Sen. De ira* 1.20.4 *"At incidit et in viros". Nam viris quoque puerilia ac muliebria ingenia sunt*.

The attitude we have toward little children is the same as the attitude the sage has toward all those who have retained their childishness even beyond adolescence and grey-haired old age. What progress have these individuals made? The evils of their minds have grown and their mistaken ways, and they differ from boys only in the size of and shape of their bodies.⁵¹

So, when Seneca uses sexist language, contrasting true men favorably with women or woman-like men, the target is a weakness and immaturity of mind that characterises children as well as women. Foolish men have an adult body but an immature, childish mind: confused, weak, and subject to all kinds of futile passions. When the philosopher is inscribed among the men, he assumes the manhood toga, becomes an adult and sheds his toddler fears (Sen. *ep.* 4.2). Similarly, those weaklings who feel quickly offended and cannot believe that a sage does not suffer any injury at all are just big little boys (Sen. *ep.* 24.13: *maiusculi pueri*), and the sage treats them as such.

In a nutshell, Seneca at least has a same-but-less model of the differences between the sexes. Both are endowed with the same mental faculties and similar dispositions. Achieving sagehood and the good life is the perfection of these endowments by which humans are akin to God. Progress is mental maturation. Children become men; fools grow up to become sages; women can become sages too, but they have a longer path to go even as adults since their innate mental weakness places them closer to children than to adult men.

What lesson, then, could those manosphere activists take away, were they to read this paper? When they feel oppressed and want their manhood back, when they react with aggression and regard this as the appropriate and manly response, they reveal how far removed they are from being what a Stoic expects of a real man. Seneca would compare them to infants throwing a tantrum. Epictetus, arguably the sternest and most ‘manly’ among Imperial Stoics,⁵² would tell them to blow their nose and grow up.

⁵¹ Sen. *De ira* 2.12.1 *Quem animum nos adversus pueros habemus, hunc sapiens adversus omnes quibus etiam post iventam canosque puerilitas est. An quicquam isti profecerunt quibus animi mala sunt auctique in maius errores, qui a pueris magnitudine tantum formaque corporum differunt.* Compare also *dial.* 12.5.5 *vanos et pueriles animos.* For further examples, see Villa 1997, 123-38.

⁵² Sherman 2007.

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