**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast,

**Aven:** where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven.

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we are talking about masculinity. We have an interview with Melanie Racette-Campbell, who is an assistant professor of Classics at the University of Winnipeg. She did her PhD at the University of Toronto and specializes in gender and sexuality and Roman literature and culture, Latin literature in the late Republic and early empire, classical reception in the Renaissance and in modern popular culture and the city of Rome.

Her new book, which was released on July 25th, is entitled The Crisis of Masculinity in the Age of Augustus, published by the University of Wisconsin Press. In it, she examines how Rome's elite men navigated the liminal moment between Republic and empire that was the ascension and reign of Augustus, [00:01:00] and how the performance and definition of masculinity were transformed.

We spoke to her the day before her book came out.

 So, hi Melanie. Thanks so much for joining us.

**Melanie:** Hi Aven and Mark. Thanks so much for having me.

**Mark:** Welcome. So to start us off I'd like to ask you the question that we ask all our guests.

Tell us about an interesting or unexpected connection in your life. It could be anything. Work, school, personal life, hobbies, family.

**Melanie:** Okay. So I have to admit that I looked back at the email that Aven sent me a few days ago and realized that it said connection, not coincidence approximately 10 minutes ago.

And so I have a coincidence for you, but that's okay because it's related to my work and stuff. That's,

**Aven:** um, Coincidences are connections. Yeah, they're unexpected connections. Yeah, they're kind of connection. A completely accurate answer. That's fine.

**Melanie:** Alright, so yesterday I was reading a book called Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome.

And I was reading about the, so [00:02:00] on the southern tip of Tiber Island in Rome during the late Republic. somebody decided that they should make it look like a ship. Yes, like the. Bow of a ship. I think that end was the bow end. Anyway, because the, the island is vaguely ship shaped anyway, and so what they had done is they used like travertine and they like made it all like, look like both ends of a ship.

You can still see what a little bit of it at the, the front, the prow, is that what we, we say and specifically you can see a little bit of carving that is kind of ship-ish. And also there's the remains of an image of the God Asclepius, who's the healing God who had a sanctuary on the island for most of antiquity.

And so I was reading about that. I'm looking at, I was looking at a picture of it. I was like, I looked it up on Google Maps. I was like, oh, I've never been there. I should search it out next time I'm there. I didn't know it was Republican in date. And then 10 minutes after I read this, a friend of mine texted me a picture with the [00:03:00] caption, "hi from Asclepius on the Tiber," and it was a picture of the thing that I had just been looking at in the book,

**Aven:** Is Asclepius trying to tell you something, is that what's going on?

**Melanie:** I was like, yeah, I was so confused. And also my friend is an archeologist, so I was like, oh, well, while you're here. I have some questions that I'd like to ask you about this site.

**Aven:** I've just been reading up on it as it happens. I know.

**Melanie:** Well, that's like, I've never even thought about this site before.

And then, there it is. And there's my friend there. And so that's my, that's my weird coincidence that happened just yesterday.

**Aven:** Well, the city of Rome has a way of intruding itself into a Latinist's life, I think. It does. Yeah. And in fact, we'll probably come back to talking a little more about the city of Rome and its intrusions into your life.

Towards the end when we talk about your next, if I'm. If I'm remembering correctly, when we talk about what you might be doing next Yes. But before,

**Melanie:** That''s why I'm reading this book.

**Aven:** [00:04:00] Exactly, exactly. There's a little foreshadowing for you. But before we get to that, let's turn to the current book. Do you like being someone of whom we can say, this is your current book?

**Melanie:** Yeah. That's amazing, right? Like, oh, I've got my current book, my next book, my next next book. I mean, actually being at that point in my career is so delightful.

**Aven:** Yeah. I think this is something to be celebrated and savored. So speaking of your current book, the Crisis of Masculinity in The Age of Augustus.

Mm-hmm. Why, to go before that to your interest in masculinity in Roman literature, in Roman masculinity, you know, why would this a subject that interested you, how far back does that interest go and, and how did you come to it?

**Melanie:** Sure.

So when I was an undergraduate my major was classical and eastern archeology, which is how I got to classics eventually. But my other major was women's and gender studies, right? So that's how I got interested in gender studies.[00:05:00] Then when I was doing my master's degree it kind of just happened, I guess.

My master's degree was kind of unusual circumstances in that I did it at a university that doesn't actually have a master's in anything like the subject I was interested in. And so one of my professors decided to kind of make me a master's program. But one of the results of this was that my classes had to be piggybacked onto classes that were undergraduate classes that already had students in them and such.

And one of the ones that ended up kind of opening up for me was a course on. Masculinity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Hmm. So that was really my first kind of real introduction to masculinity studies, because I did have this undergrad degree in women's and gender studies, but it was really women's studies, like there was very little other genders looked at at that time in women's and gender studies.

And this is, you know, 20 years ago almost. So I, did this [00:06:00] course on masculinity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance at a time when I was deciding what to do my master's thesis on. So, you know, very important formative moment. And I. I was also reading, I, I knew I was gonna do my master's thesis on something to do with Propertius.

And so I ended up kind of looking at masculinity and Propertius for my master's thesis. My original proposal for my master's thesis is what I ended up doing for my doctoral dissertation. 'cause it was way too ambitious. And that, yeah, that was basically it. It was like the, the kind of serendipity of there being this class that really sparked my interest at a point when I needed to figure out a way to focus my interests.

**Aven:** Well, and there's a connection, right? Like you say it's an undergrad level class they can really shape the lenses we start to use even when we go on and do other work or other classes or other approaches. And I think that happened to me, you know, some of the things of the, my most abiding [00:07:00] interests are come out of my undergraduate work, even though I didn't really do anything with them as a PhD student or they didn't end up being really important immediately, but they kind of, they kind of stick around in the back of your head.

I find a lot of them. Absolutely. Yeah. And so then, how did that pivot then go into the book?

**Melanie:** Okay, so my PhD dissertation was on masculinity.

Yes. It's called like The Construction of Masculinity and Propertius, I believe. So, you know, it's right there in the title.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Melanie:** So I mean, basically the the pathway from my dissertation to this book, the Crisis of Masculinity was that I wrote the book that I wanted to exist when I was a PhD student.

**Aven:** Right. Right. Right. That it would've been really, really helpful for all your footnotes.

**Melanie:** Exactly. Because there were books on masculinity in the Republic or the Roman Republic.

There were books on masculinity in the Roman Empire. There were people including [00:08:00] like, almost honestly, like as far back as Tacitus who were like, it all changed under Augustus. And like everybody's like, yep. It all changed under Augustus, but nobody had been like, so how did that work? Nobody had worked out.

Yeah. You know, what, what did this change look like? Who was

**Aven:** involved? What did it change from and to, and in what order and that kind of thing. Yeah.

**Melanie:** Well, they had the from and the to, 'cause you had the Republic and you had the Empire. Mm-hmm. But that, step of okay, how does that come, why does one turn into the other was almost completely missing from the scholarship?

And so I said, well, that, I'll write that book.

**Aven:** And then you can go back and revise your dissertation to put footnotes to yourself all the way through.

**Melanie:** I kind of was doing that on the my, my dissertation is mostly in several articles that I wrote. So yeah, actually like writing my book at the same time as I was revising those articles, it was really helpful.

**Aven:** And so maybe before we move on to talking more about the book particular things about the [00:09:00] book another question that we should probably just cover quickly when we talk about, I won't say, what does the crisis of masculinity mean? Because a) you've already pointed to that a little bit, and B) people should read the book, but also maybe we should define, you talked about masculinity studies, and maybe it's worth just talking a little bit about.

What that is and what, you know, I think we all sort of think we know what masculinity is, but what do you mean by it? When you're using that term, what does the, the field mean by it?

**Melanie:** I think, I mean, the field probably means a number of things by it. When I, when I use it, I use it to mean like, Hmm. So I'm gonna start with masculinity studies because I feel like that might be a way to talk my way into Yes.

The other ones, so masculinity studies is coming from a place where, okay, so gender studies really started as women's studies back in the seventies. And it was about like putting women back into all the places where they weren't. And one of the things is that like in focusing on [00:10:00] women, it does tend to leave men as like a default.

Men are, you know, men are just the normal thing from which other people I. From which everything else diverges. Mm-hmm. Whereas masculinity studies is like, well, no, masculine is also a gender expression. Men also have gender. They're not just the norm. And men's, behaviors, activities, experiences, are also shaped by their own genders, not just by women's genders.

And so masculinity studies is about understanding how masculine being a masculine gendered person or masculine gendered people, how that shapes people and how that shapes the

**Aven:** world. Right. And turning the same questions that are asked about how femininity is constructed, how it's affects one's experience of life to be marked as feminine, turning that onto masculine people, to males or male presenting or whatever, and to.

Say, well, it's not just [00:11:00] natural, right? Yeah. Because that's the, the, the big move of gender studies is to say gender is not natural. It doesn't just appear spontaneously at outta the mud. Like Ovid said. Exactly. It comes from forces, from real things that happen in the world.

**Melanie:** And masculinity is, is just as much, you know, constructed and like a combination of like nature and nurture and experience and body and materiality.

As, and other words that are falling outta my head. Society and culture. masculinity is as much a product of and also produces all those things as

**Aven:** femininity is. Yes, exactly. And that you can't Or that one shouldn't look only at one gender when making those questions. And I think that that question about markedness, what's the default and what's the marked, what's the, what's the deviance?

To, you know, to sort of say the thing that isn't said out loud when you talk about women as being the weird thing or the different thing in [00:12:00] male men as default, it's that women are the deviants. And that's the same thing with heterosexuality and homosexuality or any of these other things.

If you only study the one, then you're marking the other as normal and the one as, as deviant.

**Melanie:** Well, one of the advantages of studying the past is that you get to see things like, the way that men were men in ancient Roman times is not the same way that men are men now. And it really like, it clarifies that, no, this isn't just quote unquote natural.

Mm-hmm. It's, it's culturally dependent. It's, yeah. It's, those historical differences really bring

**Aven:** that out into the light. Right. So masculinity then when you're talking about in the book, is that set of constructed Now, this is the next question. The set of constructed norms, ideals, norms, ideals.

**Melanie:** Yeah. All, all of those

**Aven:** together. What, how do you wanna shape that? Or is there a way to delineate that? So the

**Melanie:** masculinity that I am mostly focused on in this book is elite Roman masculinity for a [00:13:00] lot of, basically for reasons of the sources that I'm using. And so the masculinity for these elite Romans is all, not all about, but it's very much an outward performance.

So it's about, mm-hmm. It's about the things you do or the things that a man did to show that he was a man. Mm-hmm. And the agreement of his audience, preferably his peers that the things he was doing did indeed successfully show that he was

**Aven:** a man. Right. So it's sort of a consensus between what he thinks he's doing and how it is received.

**Melanie:** Yeah. It's like a, you know, the, the performer and the audience all

**Aven:** agree that this is a, this is a man Yeah. That the things

**Melanie:** that, that this person has done. And it's like, it's, it's repetitive. Like it has, you know, if you slip up and don't be a man one day, then that brings into question, are you indeed a man?

Mm-hmm.

**Aven:** I don't one of the don't to tick the box and move on. Yeah. Yeah. And it's

**Melanie:** like, there seems to be much less of an idea that there's some kind of like inner real person. Mm-hmm.

**Aven:** [00:14:00] Mm-hmm.

**Melanie:** Like who you are is who other people think you

**Aven:** are. Right. And, what you can convey every day. Yeah.

Is, is what you are. And it doesn't matter if there's a disconnect between what you think you are inside and what's outside, because only the outside fundamentally matters. Yeah.

**Melanie:** Yeah. This is kind of, this will be, this would be going too far into like talking about Ciceronian ideas

**Aven:** of the, of persona and stuff.

Yeah. It, it gets more complicated Yeah. To be, but in sort of practice, in practical terms, it seems day-to-day that was the functional way people existed

**Melanie:** very face-to-face society. Right. Like the people, if we're talking about the elite, I mean sure there might have been hundreds of thousands of citizens of Rome at this time, but the people who mattered were fairly small number and everybody kind of knew

**Aven:** each other.

Mm-hmm. So they got a, the opportunity to judge one another on a recurring basis. Yes.

**Mark:** So, so what kind of sources are we talking? I mean, you, you [00:15:00] say that, you know, it tends to focus therefore on the elite. So I assume literary sources are an important component to that because literary sources tend to focus on the elite.

Are there any other types of sources?

**Melanie:** So the sources that I used were mostly literary, literary, both poetry and p is sort of basically, I think I touch on almost every major author from the period, at least briefly. But I did as much as I could look at other sources, sort of the introduction, I do go into monuments.

So the Altar of Peace, the cus and the Forum of Augustus and the Temple of Apollo Palus. So those are three monuments that are really Associated with Augustus himself. I also looked at I have a chapter where I'm talking about three different gods. And so I did discuss where those gods were in Romes in the sense of where those statues or or sanctuaries [00:16:00] were.

So when I can, I try to bring in the material sources. My undergraduate degree was in archeology, so I'm always like, you know, kind of, okay, yeah, I have that to kind of pick up and bring in when I can. I also looked at, I guess they're called, like we call it like the sub literary sources.

**Aven:** The that's a yes

**Melanie:** stuff that's written down, but just like somebody 200 years ago decided it wasn't good enough to be literature.

So the the Carmina Priapeia, the poems about the God Priapus, mm-hmm, also feature in one of the

**Aven:** chapters, right, which is sub literary in the sense that it's too obscene for somebody 200 years ago to decide it was literary, but it's it's not inscriptional evidence or that kind of, which is a d another category.

Again, right, the documentary and Yeah, inscriptional evidence is another kind of written source. Yeah,

**Melanie:** yeah, yeah. It's not, well, I think some of them might be inscriptions. [00:17:00] Actually, I would have to go back and look. I can't remember the exact

**Aven:** right. Yeah. That they come from a bunch of sources, don't they? Yeah, but they're poems basic, basically.

**Melanie:** They're, yeah, they're, I think they're all poems. Mm-hmm. But most of them, I don't know, again, like people 200 years ago who were being snobby about literature were like, oh, it's not very good poetry. But then there's one by, there's one by Horace, and there's one by Tibullus.

Those ones get to be literature, but all the other. Mm-hmm. Oh, and I think there's one that people used to think might be by Ovid, but it probably isn't by Ovid. Mm-hmm. And that's like, it's like it's the good one. And so it's like, oh, this one must been

**Aven:** Ovid.

Yeah. But they are in general poems about or dedicated to or describing the God Priapus, as you say, who to those who don't know, is the God most distinguished by the largeness of his male member. Yes. And the poems, I'm not normally that polite when I talk about it, but for some reason,

**Melanie:** and the poems range from mildly to [00:18:00] incredibly

**Aven:** obscene.

Yes, yes. And from erotic to invective, violent. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And so those sources then place some limitations, as you said, on, what you can talk about. Yeah.

**Melanie:** So, because most of my work, most of the book is about the, yeah. The literary sources and the way that Roman literature worked with the authors, at least in this time period are all well off, you know, they're all people who didn't have to work for a living. And the audience, well, we can, we can't be quite as sure about the audience, but certainly much of the audience would have been also would've been in the kind of, let's say top 10%, mm-hmm. Of, of Romans. So that does kind of limit Yeah.

It, it limits the,

**Aven:** limits, the evidence. Mm-hmm. Yeah. You talk a bit about that in your introduction about how you, you can't, we can't generalize from what you're going to go on to talk about to what. 90% of the Roman [00:19:00] world actually thought about masculinity, though obviously we can assume there's some continuity between the elite and the, the non-elite, but, and that, I mean, this is a problem everybody faces when talking about the ancient world.

Yes. I'm only highlighting it because I think it's always worth, we tend to, we know this and so we kind of work on that assumption, but it's, it's useful to, to say so is, is there any kind of

**Mark:** reason though to, to guess that there may be some significant differences between that to top 10% and everyone else?

**Melanie:** There are some things that in the kind of the types of activities that were valued for men that are either by custom or legally restricted to certain income levels. So the focus on things like public service in the sense of holding elected office and being in the Senate which is very important for elite masculinity was like quite literally unavailable to the vast majority of Romans because there was a minimum income that you had to have to to [00:20:00] participate.

Military leadership, again, not gonna be available to the vast majority of Romans. So those things, it's hard to say what kind of effect that would have on what the average Romans saw as like the valued actions for their masculinity.

**Aven:** Because I suppose one possible though, improbable, but I suppose one possible outcome of that would be, oh, well then everyone who's sub elite doesn't feel themselves to be truly manly. I mean, like, I'm not saying that that is necessarily or even likely to be true, but it is. And there might've been a class of people who, or a group of people who felt themselves sort of almost close enough to attain it and felt that lack. But one assumes that other groups of people found other measures.

If, if one looks at other societies, you see that happening,

**Melanie:** people find it. Well, even if you look at other sources, especially later on. So this is kind of beyond the time period that I'm looking at. But I recently taught a course on Roman masculinity, so I'm a little bit more like I've, I've got my, [00:21:00] my fingers on some of those other sources.

And so the elite tended, this is an example the elite tended to look down at, on at common soldiers like your average legionary, looking down at them as sort of brutish and dumb and like not as manly as they

**Aven:** were, the leaders, not as self controlled and things not, yeah. And

**Melanie:** like yeah, just sort of, yeah, looking down on it.

But then in the Imperial period, so after I'm looking at, there are things like tombstones for people of lower rank who are veterans, who are our soldiers and the way that they write about themselves on their tombstones makes it very clear that they didn't see any lack in their, in their, in themselves, that they were very proud of their military service.

They were proud of their rank. They're proud of being soldiers. And also we know from some documentary evidence, I think from Egypt that your, certainly your kind of centurions, [00:22:00] like your enlisted man, but who's gotten to the officer rank they were local leaders in their hometowns and such.

So I mean, it's clear that there is a divide there between the elite view of those men and their own view of

**Aven:** themselves, right. which only makes sense. Of course it does thinking of how humans are. But it's nice to have actual evidence and have it not just be supposition or parallels because I mean, we can immediately think of parallels like I think of the sort of World War I era of the British soldier, for instance.

Mm-hmm. Where the officers have one conception of masculinity and think of the common soldiers as not measuring up. But there's a very clear common soldiers, they have a different concept of masculinity. Mm-hmm. And think of their officers as very much not measuring up, you know, you think of these sort of effeminacy of the upper class soldiers and the cowardliness and things as constructed from certain perspectives.

So you can see there a divide. And I would imagine it would be [00:23:00] similar in some ways to the Roman one, though. Not exactly parallel. 'cause the officers probably saw more actual. Combat. Yeah. I think yeah. In the Roman world than, than the British officers did. But anyway, it just gives you a, a, an example, a parallel example of that.

And

**Melanie:** I mean, I, I suspect that we can probably like retroject the imperial soldier experience to the Augustan soldier experience, right? But I don't, I feel like the, the evidence isn't there to confirm that suspicion, although I could be wrong, not a specialist in military history. So

**Aven:** Yeah, but we just have, we, I think you're right in the, I neither obviously, neither am I, but I think you're right that we just don't have the same level of evidence of that level of, of soldier from the Augustan,

**Melanie:** there's just a lot more inscriptions in the imperial periods than in the Augustan. So

**Aven:** especially of the more common ranks, I think, I think that's, I feel like

**Melanie:** there's, I probably have a footnote about that

**Aven:** somewhere. You do. I just, in fact was looking at, due to the increase in the epigraphic habit in the Imperial period under Tiberius, we have more evidence for [00:24:00] local, local people retreating to their local areas to become, to big big, big fish in small ponds.

So yes, well done. You, you of the past. Correct. Okay, well, let me turn a little bit then to, you know, we're not gonna go through every chapter in the book because I think people should read it. It is real. I didn't say this at the beginning, I should say I haven't read every single chapter yet, because I didn't have it long enough, but I have read a bunch of them, and it is really good and really interesting and very clearly presented. And of course it's right, speaks to my heart in terms of my interests. So it's hardly to be surprised that I enjoy, I'm enjoying it. But I really do think it's kind of shocking that it didn't exist already.

I know, frankly, but I'm very glad it now does because I do think, and I don't, please don't take this the wrong way, but I do think it's taking something that everyone knew but didn't know the details of or hadn't bothered [00:25:00] to work out. And I don't mean, you know, I don't mean that everyone knew everything you said.

I just mean they knew, like you said at the beginning, generally speaking, they knew this happened, but with no one had, I guess, just sat down and been like, but how? And so you, you're left with that. Well, I can just say it glibly. Oh, of course there was a change in masculinity under the Augustan period.

I've said it glibly, I've said it in many a class glibly. But, so it's, that's why it feels shocking that it doesn't exist. And I think that's a, a, praise to a book that as soon as you read it, like, why, why wasn't this written already? Didn't this already? I mean, I was so necessary

**Melanie:** constantly looking for it when writing my dissertation.

So, I mean, I think one of the, one of the things that made it a bit of a challenging book to write was that I really felt like I had to try and get a grasp of as many of the possible sources as possible. So even though my focus was on literature, I mean, there's a quite a lot of literature in this period, and I, I mean, I read every, it's on the golden Age [00:26:00] thereof.

Yes, I know. And I gotta, I feel like I deserve some kind of, I, I wanna get like official credit for this. I read. Every word of Livy. Oh my God. In English. I didn't read the whole thing in Latin. I'm not like a masochist, but like I read every word of it in English and there was so much of it. And then I went and read and I read, I did read significant portions of it in Latin.

'cause I read, you know, every part that, that I was gonna, that I felt like I needed to talk about in Latin. And there's so much Livy and it is, I mean, there are points where you're like, this is amazing. And, but then there are long, long, long passages where it's like, oh no, why are you still talking?

**Aven:** There can't be another year.

There can't be another year. How could there can be yet yet another year? Yeah. Like why are we, how

**Melanie:** are we, I've I'm so many pages into this and they're still fighting the Volscii.

Good heavens.

Yeah. So I, you know, I I and I, I had not done that before 'cause I had never mm-hmm. Had a reason to read All of Livy before.

[00:27:00] A lot of the stuff I had read before, you know, I, Obviously I'd read Propertius before. I'd read Tibullus before. I hadn't read all of Ovid before. 'cause again, there's a lot of

**Aven:** of it. A lot of of

**Melanie:** it. Yeah. I think I've read all of Ovid in Latin at this point. I looked at Vitruvius, not I, not all of it.

I I was focusing for Vitruvius on like certain sections where he's talking more about things rather

**Aven:** than technical

**Melanie:** discussions of architecture. What else? Cicero. I read a lot of Cicero, Catullus, the Priapia, Horace, so much Ho-, again, there's so much Horace and I did read too, there's a lot. Of course. Yeah.

And so just like, just the literary sources and then tracking down, you know, the fragments of Pollio and the fragments of Messala. Mm-hmm. And other fragmentary historians that didn't end up going in the book. And just there's so much Augustan literature and then there's so much written about Augustan literature and trying to get a handle on that, especially stuff like Livy, where, you know, I'm trained in poetry.[00:28:00]

And so I was like, well, I need to make sure I don't look dumb, mm-hmm. When I'm talking about history. and like that to me, like that was part of the challenges and maybe one of the reasons why it hadn't been done before is that it did require, yeah. A wide variety of skills. And again, looking at the just happening to be somebody who's comfortable looking at material culture.

That's again, like not the poetry and material culture don't always go together and

**Aven:** Yeah, I think that, I mean, that makes a lot of sense to me as somebody who also wrote a dissertation on Augustan literature and took really specific measures to make sure I didn't have to read all of Ovid, for instance.

And, you know, various other things because I was, because there is, and not so much, I mean, partly because of how much the primary sources are, but really the killer is how much the secondary, how much secondary material there is. I. I feel what you're saying. I mean, yours is much, much wider than [00:29:00] what I had to do, but even so, you know, the minute you put Virgil on your reading list, your secondary material Yeah.

Just becomes ludicrous. Like, even if most of it's not gonna be useful, you know, you're gonna have to just check and just make sure and see if there's anything you have to see and, and all the rest of it. And it's, it's, it's daunting. So I think you're right. That is the fact that you have to synthesize so much in order to be able to kind of, 'cause you're trying to make an argument about a global phenomenon, I don't mean mm-hmm.

Global in the world. I mean like overarching over a 50 year period more. That's a big argument. And to do that you have to synthesize a lot of stuff. And that's, so yes, you do get, you do get points for reading all of Livy. Oh,

**Melanie:** thank you. I, you know, I've been waiting for somebody to give me those Livy points.

**Aven:** So then I won't say, so what is your conclusion? Because I, again, you've just pointed out how [00:30:00] complicated and large it is, but if I could ask you to sort of think a little bit, take a little bit of a step back and connect it, you've, you've hinted at this a little tiny bit already with about how looking at the ancient world is one of the really good ways to understand how not automatic things that we take for granted are because you look and you're like, well, they were human too, and look how different they are.

that's one of my biggest arguments for studying the ancient world in general. So I definitely agree. How do you see, this is the sort of inevitable question when, whenever we talk about Rome and it's, I think the inevitable question whenever we talk about Augustus and the world right now, and when we use the word crisis, do you see parallels or connections between what was happening in this Augustan period with masculinity particularly and what's happening now or in, in more recent or, or I suppose further back in, in more contemporary [00:31:00] history?

**Melanie:** I mean, I suppose. I, years ago I met somebody who works, I think in sociology, who was like, masculinity is always in crisis. Right? I dunno that that is true. But I think that maybe masculinity has been in crisis an unusual amount of times in the last, say, 200 years. Right? So for the Romans, The fact that at least for elite Romans, their masculinity was so outward focused, I think left it unusually likely to find it in crisis.

'cause if the outside circumstances change, then everything changes. And I think like that's effectively, like the beginning of my argument is everything in Rome was changing and all of these things that were important weren't anymore. Is there's something like that happening now? Has there something, I mean, probably from like Industrial Revolution on there have been kind of rolling things, changing the way that the world works, changing mm-hmm.

The things that [00:32:00] men and women find value in changing. And

so I suppose

that's connected. I'd say like there's a difference in that. These. Crises, if we call, call them, that have been coming thick and fast in the last 200 years in a way that they, like for the Romans, I think there was, there was a long crisis while the, while the Republic collapsed and until the empire kind of solidified, but then, you know, things were pretty okay for quite some time.

Mm-hmm. And it was stable and yeah. so there are some similarities in that, you know, outside circumstances are really causing a lot of men to kind of grapple with how to be men and changing circumstances. But it's happening more and faster. Every generation, less than every, less than a generation,

**Aven:** so, mm-hmm.

Yeah, I think, I mean, I think that is something that we see when we look back at everything, as you say, pre-industrial revolution is simply that the changes. Life is always changing, [00:33:00] but the changes in societal structure just happen slower. Yeah. it doesn't mean there isn't a problem readjusting, but you have a longer period of time and there's a longer time between each major shift.

Sometimes they happen really fast, like the black death happens and yeah, a bunch of things change all at once, but then it stabilizes and you get a period of relative stability. And, I think that's why we kind of don't feel the same now. So I, yeah, I I'm not trying to push you to say that they are the same.

I just think that that's one of those questions that always comes up whenever we talk about the ancient world. You know, so how is it exactly like how the American male is facing the world today? And I'd say

**Melanie:** it is not. There we go. Especially 'cause I, I suspect that the crisis affected the elite far more than it did anybody else.

Yes. Whereas I think that's not

**Aven:** true now. Yeah. I think that's a really good point actually, because going back to what you were saying before, many of the things you're pointing to as you know, the basic [00:34:00] problem is that many of the things that constituted elite masculine performance become less available to elite men.

Right? Yeah. That's the, very, very short argument. And therefore they had to find, they either couldn't find new ways of constructing themselves as masculine, and that was a problem, or they found new ways. Yeah. And you go through a number of the mechanisms that they, that we see being tried out.

And then your conclusion kind of comes to, some of them seem to have lasted and kind of turned into stable, new, stable systems and others didn't. And then there were some other things that people came up with. Yeah. Sorry. That was a very simplified version of your story,

**Melanie:** Simplified. Yeah. That,

**Aven:** that, that's, that's what happened.

Yes. Overall. But by that same token, like you just said, many of those things that were being taken away from elite men as options had never been available to Non elite men. And many of the things that had been available to elite men, non-elite men didn't change or had [00:35:00] changed earlier. I suppose we could push that change earlier, back to like the beginning of year round soldiering and the, much smaller amount of small farming say Yeah.

You know, back to sort of the time of the Gracchi or something. But even that's probably an overstated difference for most people. Almost.

**Melanie:** Yeah. I mean, for, 90% or more of Roman men, and especially if we're thinking of like the entire Roman empire, right. And not

**Aven:** just Italy. Yeah.

**Melanie:** For most of them.

Their value, you know, from fatherhood, from being like, you know, responsible farmers and respected by their peers for being responsible for farmers and good fathers. Mm-hmm. And occasionally, for some of them, for soldiering, those things would not have changed, didn't really change any significant manner for the vast majority of people.

**Aven:** Right. And the, big crisis of suddenly, I can't compete with my peers for supremacy because there's one supreme person that nobody can compete with. Mm-hmm. That doesn't matter to people who've always had superiors. Exactly. And I mean that in a, [00:36:00] social sense, not in an ethical sense, but who've always seen themselves as only partway up a ladder.

**Melanie:** And my suspicion is that competition was important to them too. Mm-hmm. But the level of competition they were involved in would not have changed. I, I can't imagine Augustus paying attention to like, who's the most respected man in the village kind

**Aven:** of competition. No, exactly. That, that ability to, to compete with your peers didn't change because there had always been people who were above you, your peer level, and that didn't change.

Yeah. Which is not, which is among the senatorial class. There had never been someone who was above their level

**Melanie:** And the fact that maybe now you were. If you were a soldier, the fact that the supreme commander of the forces was now the emperor rather than a yearly consul would've had almost no difference to, made no difference to your life, right.

As a, as a common soldier.

**Aven:** Exactly. that, as you say, is very different than now when I would say that sort of ramifications of what is and isn't masculinity while it comes out [00:37:00] differently at different social classes. Yeah. The changes to society affect all of our Yeah. Social classes in one way or another.

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. So, so every man is now in crisis as opposed to only 10% of men. How does that feel there, mark?

**Mark:** So, I guess you could say that Romans thought very explicitly about masculinity, which is not necessarily a, given. Mm-hmm. Although maybe I'm, not, thinking of this as, as universal as it actually is, but like is, and you, you certainly can say that now that people, theorize about masculinity to, a very large degree are the Romans, I mean, is, is that fair to say, are the Romans, unusually concerned with thinking about how masculinity works?

And if so, why is that, and why is that, mm-hmm, true now? For at least some cultures now and again, that may not be, universal across the world.

**Melanie:** [00:38:00] So I think the Romans were unusually focused on thinking about masculinity and what it meant to be a man and such. Part of this would go back to their, the, the culture is very martial and they saw themselves as being specifically blessed with, and I guess dependent on "virtus", this like "manly courage".

And it being specifically it being like the source of their success and something that's quite central to their society. So the strong military history, even though by the age of Augustus there was probably fewer Romans serving in the military, sort of percentage wise. And certainly as we go into the empire you know, the legions are no longer made up of, of Italians for the most part.

Although in the Augustan period there were still plenty of Italians in the legions. So that, that like long history on martial courage, which it wasn't just them who thought. So like I think that Polybius, the Greek author writing in the Punic Wars [00:39:00] era, I think he talks about like their, that being kind of the source of their success as well.

Mm-hmm. So that is part of it. Part of it's their history. Some of it, Roman women, you know, they were, they existed and marriages were, their relationships with women were important, but their relationships with other men were kind of what defined them. Mm-hmm. And so just. Men competing with men relating to men just being so important for their society, I think did make them unusually thoughtful about manhood.

I mean we've got Cicero and part of it is also the sources that survive. So we've got Cicero in the Late Republic who is just like talking about good men and bad men and what it is to be a good man, what it is to be a bad man. We've got, oh, going back to Cato the elder and his, you know, a hundred years, 150 years before, and his, they like, you know was it like a, a good man who's good at speaking?

Oh, I can't even remember the

**Aven:** quote. Oh, yeah, yeah. [00:40:00] We can stop and look it up if you want, but yeah, I know what you mean. The The most important thing is to be a good man who is good at speaking or something like that.

**Melanie:** Yeah. But like, but you know, being a man and that, and that word. Well, and they're, that they've got, you know, two different words for man vir and homo.

Mm-hmm. And like, vir is a man, a real man. And that's really clear in the way that it's used as, whereas like homo can just mean like a biological male. And you could have biological males who weren't men. Plenty of them. so they were kind of more interested, I think, in what it means to be a man.

And felt that the success of their society was grounded in Rome having a good source of real men who would be out there being

**Aven:** manly. Mm-hmm.

**Melanie:** What's good at being a man you know, it's being a successful military leader, being a successful politician, leading your country well having a well run and prosperous estate.

[00:41:00] Having family who listen to you and do what they're supposed to do, like, those are all the things that make you a good

**Aven:** man. And only if you fulfill all of those things t matter how skilled you are at speaking. Yes.

**Melanie:** Oh, I was also, I had, I realized another point, which was the invective. If we look at their invective, it's

**Aven:** obsessed with

**Melanie:** proving other people aren't good men.

Yes. So much of the insults both like ranging from, you know, graffiti on the street to like high, you know,

**Aven:** literature to just grow in the, Senate house. Yeah, exactly. It is about

**Melanie:** the guy I don't like is a bad man. He's, it's not just that he's, you know, he's did this wrong thing. It's like, no, he's a bad man in every possible way.

He fails at being a

**Aven:** man. Yes. Yeah. And vice versa, to say that someone failed as being a man is all you need to say. Yeah, absolutely. You don't need to say anything else once you've said that. There's nothing left to worry about. Like they, they, their character has been assassinated [00:42:00] as much as they possibly can be.

Yeah. I think, I think that piece about like the two things the Romans thought their state depended on, right. Getting in good with the gods, keeping the pax deorum, and having manly strong self-controlled men. Mm-hmm. You know, those were the two things that you look back, you look at the Aeneid, do you look at, at Ennius, it doesn't really matter where you look, you look at Horace and you make this argument very strongly, but like Livy. Yeah. Everybody. It's those two things. You have to stay in good with the gods and you have to keep the quality of Roman manhood consistent because when Roman manhood slips, the whole state slips.

Yeah. And so if that is your obsession, You're gonna talk about it and write about it and think about it, because you're always gonna be wondering like, when things go wrong, what have we done? Where, where did we go wrong? How have our men failed? Exactly. It's gonna be like it's not an individual question.

I guess that's sort of part of it, right? It's not, I think if you agree, Melanie, but like, it's not just about how do I,[00:43:00] how am I a good person? How do I get to be a good man? How do I succeed? But like, how do we all do it? And I think that's part of why the invective is so strong, is because it really is a matter of keeping everyone else in check.

Like, if everyone starts to slip at being a man, we're all doomed. Exactly.

**Melanie:** It's vitally important to them. So, and I think, Mark, you asked something about some part of your question was about maybe how it's connects to other

**Aven:** societies mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. That I'm

**Melanie:** less confident about. I feel like mm-hmm.

Are there societies that are less obsessed with being men? I mean, probably, I think our, you know, our current society is less obsessed with the question of, of, of men or at least the parts of it that I tend to see.

**Aven:** Yeah, there's a splintering right. Going on. Now there are people who are very obsessed with this question.

Mm-hmm. But are they the mainstream? Sort of, are they as mainstream as Cicero was? Well, that's just it,

**Melanie:** like, this is, yeah. These, this is not a fringe group of people. This is, you know, this is the [00:44:00] main culture. I don't know enough about this to be sure, but I have a suspicion that probably there were like Renaissance Venice might also have been obsessed with manhood in a similar way.

Mm-hmm. And possibly for similar reasons. And that's all the societies I feel comfortable. I mean,

**Mark:** I imagine you could say that it's not as big a deal in the high middle Ages. Yes. Oh,

**Melanie:** definitely. Mm-hmm.

**Mark:** Because there, the sort of model of behavior is, is Jesus, right? Mm-hmm. Yes. And so you're not it's a very different kind of masculinity in a sense.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And you, and you can even see that changing from the early Middle Ages when they're only fairly recently Christianized and had a very different conception of what mm-hmm. Masculinity is. Mm-hmm. So yeah, I mean, it's dangerous to say well, this group of people, they just aren't, concerned with this.

Mm-hmm. It, it obviously changes over time. Mm-hmm. So,

**Aven:** yeah. Yeah. And I think maybe the thing about the Middle Ages, for instance, it's not that they're not obsessed with, for instance, what makes [00:45:00] one virtuous. Hmm. Absolutely. They're obsessed with that. But it's, and it's not that they aren't gendered, of course there are different, but when you follow Jesus, anyone can follow Jesus.

Yes. Yeah. You know, for instance, to be a good Christian is actually the same set of virtues for both men and women. Yeah. They may express themselves slightly differently. Chastity looks different for men than chastity looks for a woman. But when your, you know, the ideal, it's not that Jesus is completely sexless, but he does not, he is not outstanding in his maleness specifically.

Yeah. Yeah. And so I think perhaps, you know, that's a very broad statement. Of course, people are gonna immediately say, well, but what about this, this, this, and this? But like, I think that that, a very basic thing, how to be a good Christian is less obsessed with the specifics of manhood. Mm-hmm.

Yeah. Than how to be a good Roman is obsessed with the specifics of manhood. Yeah, absolutely. Roman is, Male in a way that a good Christian doesn't have to be. They, they

**Melanie:** had opinions about how to be a good woman, but they were

**Aven:** far less

**Melanie:** like obsessed with it. Yeah. I feel like being a good woman, at least to a Roman man, [00:46:00] it was pretty simple.

You, you be chaste.

**Aven:** Mm-hmm. Don't spend too much money. Don't wear too many earrings. Everything's fine. Yes.

**Mark:** And it's very much tied up in you know, a good Roman woman is a mother to

**Aven:** Romans. Yes. Right? Yeah. Is a good Roman mother to good Roman men, right? Yes. That's the, that's what you need to be. And a good

**Melanie:** Roman wife because that's part, you know, a woman's goodness was part of

**Aven:** her husband's goodness.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. when a woman fails, it is in large part because. Her men have failed. Yes. it is a symptom of the failure of manhood rather than the cause of it in a way that you get in other cultures sometimes.

**Melanie:** Well, I always think of like one of the, you know, one of the differences between like the Romans and the Athenians is that, like for the of Romans wife was part of his self image.

Part of his public image. Mm. Mm-hmm. This this, you know, image of like the Roman wife weaving in the atrium as visitors come and go and visible from the street because she's [00:47:00] being visibly virtuous and that adds to her husband's

**Aven:** virtue. Right. Which is very different than the ideal Athenian idea of a woman's virtue is exemplified by not being on display or visible.

**Melanie:** Exactly. Whereas a woman, a Roman woman's virtue is supposed to be on display. Mm-hmm. But it's only virtuous as long as that virtue, as long as that display is benefiting her male

**Aven:** relatives. Mm-hmm. Exactly. And that becomes very obvious in the Imperial family. And we don't need to get into all of that 'cause that's women and we don't care about women.

But, but you know, that becomes that instrumentalizing of female virtue is really obvious with Livia and Octavia and, and the failure of it with the Julias and things like that. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So anyway, you can't generalize that Rome is the only or most obsessed in the world 'cause I don't know enough about every culture in the world, but I do think there's something distinctively explicitly. I, I agree with you, mark that. Mm-hmm. the, the degree of [00:48:00] explicit concern for it. Yeah. Mm-hmm. It's sort of interesting. Yes. Yeah.

**Mark:** So I mean, given that it is kind of tempting to try and draw parallels between Rome and

today, I'm curious about your experience, in the classroom. Like have you been able to teach on this topic? And, you know, the sort of academic ideal, I guess, is to have your, research and your teaching overlap really nicely. Mm-hmm. And if so, what is the reception of, the modern student to this topic?

**Melanie:** So I have taught masculinity twice. Most recently this past winter semester. When I got to, when I did Roman masculinity, the first time I did it, it was Greco Roman masculinity, but the second time was Roman masculinity. So it was a, a senior seminar. So small, small group, a small but very committed group.

 student reception again, they're signing up for a class that is called Roman Masculinity. So but the students it's been very positive. They're very interested, they're very curious. They're [00:49:00] really interested in like learning about Roman masculinity being different. They're interested in the things that, like they didn't expect to come up, come across.

I kind of arrange the class so that it's a little bit student led, in that, at the beginning of the year, I write a whole bunch of topics on the board, way more than we could possibly do, and I have students vote on which ones we're actually gonna cover. So that's great for like keeping students invested and they get to like, have their pet topic.

They love, yeah, they're just really, yeah, this, it's been very positive. I've had, so from the first time I taught it at Memorial University of Newfoundland I wanna say two of the students in that class who were either at that time or later graduate students, ended up having an element of their paper from that class, be part of their thesis.

So very, very enthusiastic students. they love, they're so smart about gender and about different expressions of gender and gender [00:50:00] being a spectrum and gender not being kind of this innate binary opposition. And they're just so eager to learn more. And also, you know, horrified by some of the Romans.

**Aven:** Well, that is, as we all should be, right? Absolutely. I was gonna say absolutely the correct response to many things. One learns about the ancient world. Everybody,

**Melanie:** we, we had a week when we were looking at some Catullan, some, some Catullus, and they were all just like, what is wrong with him? Which I love. 'cause you know, the, the the old, I guess maybe two generations ago at this point, idea of like, Catullus is the, the poet who undergraduates feel most connected to not current undergraduates.

**Aven:** Yeah. That was a product of a) somewhat expurgated texts and b) a very different kind of masculinity being in vogue. Yes. Shall we say? [00:51:00] Yeah. On that note, what do you think is the sort of, maybe this, you know, for your incoming students or when you talk about this subject to other people, what is the public understanding of Roman masculinity, do you think?

I know that there's gonna be a spectrum of that too, but Yeah. Like is there something, if you could correct people's assumptions about Roman masculinity, are there things that you hear fairly frequently that you, you know, these are the big misconceptions people have.

**Melanie:** I think the general conception people have is not that off from a very kind of generic right answer.

Because when people think of Romans, I think that they think of, they think of gladiators, they think of soldiers, they think of that kind of tough martial masculinity, which really is at the core of Roman masculinity. What I end up doing is, you know, saying, okay, we're gonna start with that and then we're gonna look at all the ways what you think that is is different.

Right. [00:52:00] So sexuality is a big one. Just the idea that sexual sexual orientation as it is generally thought of today is, would be alien to Romans. Mm-hmm. The idea of putting men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women in the same conceptual category would be utterly bizarre to them.

Right. And so like, that's one of the things I do fairly early on is like, talk about sexuality and how that's not gonna work the way you think it's gonna work. What other things? Sometimes people think of Romans as being decadent orgy havers, all of them, right? Mm-hmm. So that's a thing that I'm quick to be like, no, Romans thought of themselves generally as extremely virtuous,

**Aven:** upstanding people.

Puritanical, even one might say. Yeah. And like

**Melanie:** a lot of those orgy stories are coming from Romans who are trying to make other Romans

**Aven:** look bad. Yes, yes, exactly. They're not saying this [00:53:00] is the norm. They're saying, look at this monster and the orgies he has. Yes.

**Melanie:** So yeah, like that, that idea of like, you know, Romans are actually really concerned about virtue really concerned about how, how you should act and self-control, like the, the centrality of self-control again, is one.

In this most recent class we started with this idea of like, disciplina and like, and putting, putting things before yourself. That's another, I guess that's another one is that I think, you know, we live in a society that's very individualistic and that the idea that for Romans, the individual was the least important factor in decisions, or at least was supposed to be.

You're supposed to, you know, first the gods, then Rome, then your family, then

**Aven:** yourself. Right? Yeah. I think that might, maybe is also affected by the fact that the most famous Romans are the emperors and Julius Caesar, who are l'etat c'est moi, among other things. So that there's like the thing that's best for Rome is the thing that's best for me and vice versa.

But also Julius [00:54:00] Caesar in particular, and the other warlords, you know, the whole problem with them was that they put their own self-interest ahead of the state. Yeah. In the eyes of their enemies anyway. And, but that the, the realizing that they are the exception, or at least should be the exception, is I think the thing that is surprising to people and, and

**Melanie:** that even they would, would, wouldn't, you know, they would've put it as, they would've said, oh, you know, I'm doing this for Rome.

**Aven:** Mm-hmm. Not for me. Absolutely. Yeah.

**Mark:** And, and I mean, I guess a lot of these misconceptions are being driven by, what elements Hollywood is picking up on. Mm-hmm. And you know what stories they want to tell and what gets presented to the public, therefore. Yes.

**Aven:** And also, and you know, it's the, it's, it's the flip side too.

Like what do we currently think a good man looks like? Yeah. Mm-hmm. Well, obviously the Romans are gonna look like that. Yeah. Without the things that we think are decadent about our own culture or that are slippages in our own culture or whatever. Right. So you get this projection of [00:55:00] idealized, of different forms of idealized or monsterized.

Mm-hmm. You get a Nero, you get a Caligula and that's the monster, but you get that projection onto this canvas.

**Mark:** Yes. Now, wasn't there a weird reality. TV show about bros and, and gladiators

**Aven:** these men.

**Melanie:** It was so ama. I've only seen one episode, but it was so amazing. It was called Bromans.

**Aven:** Bromanss. Right.

**Melanie:** I watched one episode with my friend Emer, when she was visiting us in Newfoundland, and we'd been out that night and then we came home and decided to watch Bros and Emer, who is Emer O'Toole who is a wonderful, amazing writer and also wrote a book about gender when I started writing this book.

So she was a person I had specifically chosen to watch this with, and it was amazing 'cause Emer just like slowly like engulfed herself in the blanket that she was sitting on so that she didn't have to look at it anymore. It was re yeah, it basically like a bunch of British bros [00:56:00] and a bunch of British whatever the female

**Aven:** equivalent of a bro would be. The, the girlfriends thereof? Yes. The girlfriends of

**Melanie:** Bross. Yeah. They had to do like allegedly Roman

**Aven:** tasks like, but yeah, there was some kind of

**Melanie:** gladiator ring. I feel like maybe they were squishing grapes for wine.

**Aven:** I feel like I already, because this was a, to be to be clear, this was aired in the UK and wasn't easy to watch here.

Like Yeah. So that's why I, I haven't seen it though I've heard about it. I, I couldn't bring my, it, like I said, I only watched the one episode,

**Melanie:** I mean, it had nothing to do. It had, was barely had anything to do with actual, with Romans. Yeah. But that, but they were definitely pulling on the idea of the gladiator and the like big,

**Aven:** like strong dude manly men.

Yeah. So

**Mark:** what they should have been doing is forcing all these bros to act selflessly for the state

**Melanie:** they should have if they wanted to be them to be real men. Yes. Yeah.

**Aven:** I, I would

**Mark:** watch that. Watch a bunch of bros be forced

**Aven:** to to take [00:57:00] on, to take on political office for no, with no personal gain spend all their own money to, get Office to give away money to to get fame. Yeah. To honestly that

**Melanie:** the money thing is another. One of the things that is like students often I find, have difficulty with is the idea that money people, or at least elite, like they're not doing stuff for the money. Exactly. Because money in itself is only a means to an end.

It's not an end itself. Mm-hmm. Their focus is not on profit. Their focus is on what's is, is on glory and

**Aven:** honor. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. and that money is not actually a measure of that. I think. Exactly. Because you could say now that people That's true too. You know, beyond a certain level of material comfort people don't want money because they want money.

They want money because of the power it gives them. And that was sort of true in the ancient world, but like having a lot of money. Was not glorious. No. Beyond a certain level, beyond reaching the levels you needed to, to be able to be a senator or whatever. Just having money, it was only [00:58:00] glorious if you spent it, if you used it, if you dis displayed it in certain ways.

Yeah. And that was only, it's the opportunities it presented to you to be, to do other things, that was what money gave you.

**Mark:** Yeah. So like now it would be, you know, billionaires building rockets to send themselves into space. Right. It's not the money itself, but the fact that you can do that.

**Aven:** Yeah. I guess

**Melanie:** I think it's more of like the, I guess an earlier era of not billionaires Yeah, but millionaires,

**Aven:** the Carnegies and the Yeah, exactly.

**Melanie:** Like the foundations and the, and the kind of putting their name on concert halls. That's more what the Romans were doing with

**Aven:** their money. Yeah, exactly. It's getting, getting, it's the Rockefellers and the Carnegies and the, and and the people who, yes, they wanted lots of money because money was nice to have, but then they needed to spend it in really splashy ways.

Right? Yeah. So that they could be remembered. And I think that, that euergitism, I mean, you talk about that as being fundamental to Roman elite masculinity. Mm-hmm. And absolutely was not [00:59:00] only Romans, but certainly. And yeah. And that, and that, that idea of how, I think that's one of the things that, that is different from modern masculinity that is hard to get across when I've taught to students.

Mm-hmm. Is that idea that being a good provider and a hard worker in the sense of like having a good job and making good money for your family mm-hmm. Is simply not a part of the conception of. Elite Roman Manhood. I

**Melanie:** mean, if you bits of it are didn't do it, it would be if you didn't do it, it would be bad.

But doing it is like a baseline.

**Aven:** Yeah. And it's also not about making money Yeah. For your family. Because a good Roman man already has enough money, doesn't have to make it. And if you're elite, I mean, you know, like the idea that if you had enough money you wouldn't work. You know, there's that Protestant work ethic, which even if I had lots of money, I would still work because a good man, like when a man retires and doesn't have a career and suddenly is like conception of his manhood falls apart, which is a very common [01:00:00] sort of trope of the 20th century.

Maybe not true now, I'm not sure. But you know, it was the sort of thing of the, the career worker. Mm-hmm. Once he can't work, he has no value as if he's not a worker. That part of it. Is what I've, I've sort of been trying to get across to students that that's not that idea of like being a good person because you work for a wage is the literal opposite of what a Roman elite would think makes you a good man, right?

Absolutely. Wage working is, is is terrible. And that's

**Melanie:** another place where there's clearly a disconnect between Roman men, between elite and non-elite. Because yes, if it was terrible, if, if the non-elite thought it was terrible, they wouldn't be putting their occupations

**Aven:** on their tombstones. Yes, exactly.

No, this is obviously something where the ability to live a life where you don't have to work for a wage Yeah. Changes your viewing of how that's, whether that's virtuous. Yeah. The, and

**Melanie:** I'm thinking again, with like spending money, the, that there are like right and wrong ways. So Yes. Spending a bunch of money on a [01:01:00] very elaborate and fancily decorated public building, Good.

Spending a bunch of money on a very elaborate and fancily decorated house of your own,

**Aven:** bad. Yes. Right. Spending money on personal, physical pleasure, terrible. Mm-hmm. Spending money on baths that give personal pleasure, physical pleasure to a bunch of other people. Fine. Yep. Yeah. Yeah. But it's a thing

**Melanie:** of like the individual is supposed to be last.

You gotta Exactly. The resources should be for the public good. Not for yourself. I mean, also for yourself. Obviously nobody's,

**Aven:** yeah. Most people, these, these were not all pure altruists. It's important to understand that, but but that's because spending money on other people got you something. Exactly. And I think that's the key, right?

Yeah. Like being virtuous and thinking of others did in fact benefit the self. And you could still have your

**Melanie:** own super fancy house as long as it was your villa in the country where people wouldn't see

**Aven:** it. Yeah.

So, alright. there's more we could always, I mean, when can we not talk more about [01:02:00] Roman men? And there's so much in the poetry that I personally find the most fascinating, but we've been talking for a while so I think we'll wrap it up there. But before we stop, I wanna ask two questions Okay. I wanna talk about two things. First of all, what's the next book, Melanie? Well what are you working on now?

**Melanie:** The next book is going to be, Also about masculinity. It is going to be about Cicero, the city of Rome and masculinity. The basic idea is how does Cicero use places in and possibly movement through the city to comment upon and draw or like paint pictures of men, both himself and others?

I am working on the assumption that there are obvious associations, well, I know there are obvious associations of certain places. So like, you know, the forum, that's a place where men do proper [01:03:00] manly things. The, I don't know, the banqueting hall is possibly a place where they're doing improper things.

Right. So I'm gonna start with what I feel like will be an obvious place, which is with Mark Antony in the Philippics. Mm-hmm. I'm pretty sure that the places, I mean Cicero's opinion of if Mark Antony are quite clear. So I should be able to build myself a map or a set of guidelines for what places are good, what places are bad, and also like many other more subtle nuances.

And then from there look into other other places in Cicero's work where he's perhaps being less obviously destroying somebody's masculinity. Mm-hmm. I assume that there's associations between space and gender and Rome. I assume that some of them will be obvious and some of them will be less obvious.

And so what I would like to do is start with ones that are obvious so that I can then work out from there to the ones that are less obvious. I mean, if you look at modern times is there any particular. Reason why? I don't know. Like what's a place that's gendered masculine?

**Aven:** A sports bar.

**Melanie:** [01:04:00] All right. So a sports bar is a place that is, you know, gendered masculine. And if you see men in there, you would have certain assumptions about the kind of man they are. Is that universally obvious that that would lead to those assumptions? Probably not. Were there many assumptions like that in ancient Rome that would've been very obvious to Cicero's audience, but are perhaps not obvious to us?

I'm sure there must have been, and I would like to figure out what they are.

**Aven:** Right. Hence the reading about the architecture of Rome. Exactly. And a cunningly chosen topic because it requires you to actually visit the city of Rome at least a few times.

**Melanie:** It does indeed. Because there, it's not obvious just from looking at maps where things are in relationship to each other, what you could see from certain places, mm-hmm.

The way things cluster, like, are they actually accessible or is there some like natural or human built feature that would've made them not accessible?

**Aven:** Yeah. Mm-hmm. No, it was very, very smart because that was one of the great flaws in my entire approach to the ancient world, was that I didn't [01:05:00] think of a, I could not think of a reason that I had to travel for my research.

It's a terrible, terrible error. So well done. You know, I've

**Melanie:** already gone, like, I went last summer and I've already like realized things about Cicero's Rome that had never occurred

**Aven:** to me before. So there you go. It's all completely valid. And then the last thing I wanted to end on is something that we are connected through.

One of the ways that we, you and I are connected and also about masculinity, which is just to tease the other book that is coming out soon from you. Which is the book that we worked on together.

**Melanie:** Yes. So coming soon, I believe, in November, 2023 is its publication date, is Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World, an edited collection edited by myself and Aven McMaster with chapters ranging from classical Athens to medieval Byzantium, mm-hmm.

From

**Aven:** the Roman [01:06:00] world, the Greek world. To the modern day, to modern, to to fascist Italy, to modern Republicans uh, modern internet culture. Yeah. A big wide range. Yeah. And it's been an, a real pleasure to work on it with you and I and you've been my saving grace all the way through, which is absolutely the reason I spoke to you originally because it's your subject and you knew more about publishing than I did.

And those two things have come to the fore again and again in our work together.

**Melanie:** But see, and I, I think of you as being the saving grace. 'cause you were the one who is like talking to people and like dealing with organizing people and making them ring stuff and writing them, and I was just like, I don't want to do any of that.

And also like the public facing side of it, I also am like, Hmm, Aven Aven

**Aven:** is already good at that. Yes. Perfect. Complimentarian. Yes. Yeah, no, I'm, I'm very excited. That's been a book that we started in [01:07:00] 2018. Does that sound right? Sounds about right. Yeah, I think, I think we were we started talking about it then anyway, and it has been winding its way slowly through a pandemic, through you getting a full tenure track job and moving across the country for it and me losing a tenure track job and yeah, me, me, jigging a career and that, that has been a, it's been a bunch of stuff that we've been working on that book through there has

**Melanie:** been, well, and I, I just, I feel like I want to get this in about, like this, my book, my book Oh.

Which I started writing in 2014. And is Coming out now. And it's 'cause I spent seven years as contingent faculty. Yeah. And having to teach a lot and apply for jobs all the time and not having any stability and not even some years not knowing if I was gonna be able to stay in the field.

Mm-hmm. And then miraculously, as soon as I got a tenure track job, somehow I finished it. Like within

**Aven:** six months I

**Melanie:** think I had I had the full, the full [01:08:00] manuscript into my publisher. Yeah. Yeah. It's amazing what stability does for you.

**Aven:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. The, the psychic and emotional and very practical time and space to do actual real work.

Yeah. No, you've been you have worked your butt off at all of these things and the fact that you managed to also write a book. Even if it wasn't complete until that point is astonishing to me. And so I think you should feel, I'm sure you do, but you should feel extremely proud of yourself for managing it to, to do all of that.

It's it's quite astonishing. It's a

**Melanie:** real labor of love. I, and I do love this book and I'm very happy with it.

**Aven:** And it also, for those of you who can't see it, which is all of you, unless you go and look at the show notes, where I ha will have a picture of this, it is also really good looking. I mean, it's, I don't say that about a lot of academic books.

I've gotta say it's a really cool cover and I'm gonna, you should all go and look at it. [01:09:00]

**Melanie:** I, yeah, so much thanks to the, the design team at University of Wisconsin Press 'cause it's gorgeous. I gave them a very vague, like, oh, maybe there could be a statue of an Augustan man on the front. And from that they created this

**Aven:** amazing cover.

Yeah, it's really, really good. So great. Well, stay tuned for more news about the Toxic masculinity book because as Melanie said, I am in charge of the public facing stuff, so you'll hear more about it in this feed. But for the meantime thank you so much again. This is the crisis of masculinity in the age of Augustus from the University of Wisconsin Press.

And it is available, well, by the time this is posted, it will probably be available if not now, very soon. And if this is a topic that interests you , for those of you who are not academics, it is an academic book. It's a scholarly book, but it is very clearly written. If you're interested in the topic, you can read it.

Let me just say that. Like, I don't think, you know, you [01:10:00] translate all the Latin, you, you do all the stuff that makes it accessible in that way.

**Melanie:** And my mom is reading it.

**Aven:** Yeah, I think it, I know it's hard for me sometimes to be exactly sure. 'cause I know the topic, you know the stuff so well, but I, I, it's by no means impenetrable.

Sorry, that was a masculinity joke for those of you.

**Melanie:** Well, thank you. I worked, I worked very hard to make it

**Aven:** readable. So I, I really do think it is, so, if it is something that you're interested in, I think you know, whether or not you're, you're a scholar in the area, I think you, you could certainly read it. But thank you so much for joining us and talking to us about it.

Oh, thank you for

**Melanie:** having me on. I've really enjoyed, well, I, I always enjoy talking about my work, so this was really great, and I always enjoy talking

**Aven:** to you. Yeah, two birds, one stone. Well, we'll talk to you again soon.

**Mark:** Thanks again.

**Aven:** Bye.

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**Mark:** Bye.