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Effeminacy in the Shadow of Empire: The Politics of Transgressive Gender in Josephus’s *Bellum Judaicum*

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When it comes to tyrants, or at least literary portrayals of tyranny in political invective, decadence knows no limits. The goal, it seems, is to conjure as terrifying a specter of lurid debauchery as is possible, a grotesque monster whose deviant ways portend social and political devastation. And in this history of “making monsters,” colorful images of gender deviancy play an especially privileged role. To take but one rather extreme example, the twelfth-century *Kaiserchronik*—a poetic account of Roman and German emperors—includes a particularly decadent tale of the emperor Nero, who supposedly ingested a magic potion in order to become pregnant, and then proceeded to give birth to a toad out of his mouth. On one level it is perhaps tempting to dismiss this bizarre tale, one of numerous medieval legends of Nero’s pregnancy,¹ as nothing more than the figment of a wildly inane imagination, the product of an author still trapped—to borrow a Petrarchian paradigm of historiography—in the regressive dark ages after the intellectual lights of the classical era had long since dimmed. But such a dismissal ignores a crucial detail. The *Kaiserchronik*, however bizarre its portrayal of male parturition may seem to the modern reader, is heir to a longstanding tendency—attested abundantly even in the so-called classical era—to view Nero, and indeed political enemies in general, through a lens of transgressive gender behavior.²

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² And we need not look only to the distant past to find gender-deviant discourse in political invective. William Jefferson Clinton, the forty-second president of the United States, frequently found himself on the receiving end of a torrent of highly charged sexual invective, including allegations of sodomite sympathies (among other perceived immoralities), which ostensibly indicated, at least for one vocal critic, that Clinton was “a tyrant, a monster”; see Erik Eckholm, “From Right, a Rain of Anti-Clinton Salvos,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1994.
What we are speaking of is, of course, a literary (or oratorical) phenomenon, a discursive strategy that ultimately functions to mediate a particular view of the social, cultural, and/or political landscape. In other words, the gender deviant topos at the core of the present investigation only marginally pertains to the actual behavior of putative tyrants. The more fundamental issue is the extent to which gender deviancy serves as a mode of representation, a means of constructing an imagined world within which gendered characters become critical reference points for a particular notion of “self” and “other.” However much these literary monsters distort the underlying historical realities of the objects of invective, they nevertheless offer a crucial glimpse into the ideological realities at work within a particular historical context. The pervasive presence of gender deviancy within political invective, not only in antiquity but also today, thus underscores its rhetorical potency, its capacity to map boundaries, be they social, political, cultural, or ethnic.

I argue in this analysis that the Judaean historian Flavius Josephus partakes in this discursive strategy, deploying within his *Bellum Judicum* (hereafter *B.J.*) the topos of gender deviancy in order to “tyrannize” his arch rival John of Gischala. Specifically, in *B.J.* 4.560–563 Josephus portrays the Judaean rebels under John’s command, and by association John himself, as effeminate objects of sexual penetration. In so doing, he draws on a widespread tendency in Roman discourse to link perceived gender anomalies with an excessive and uncontrollable lust for power, constructing an image of “Eros unleashed” as a symbolic framework through which to define and disparage tyrants. Moreover, this image of effeminate and penetrable tyranny in *B.J.*, although dubious as a source of reliable information for the Gischalan’s exploits in Galilee and Judaea, taps into a resurgent masculinizing impulse in Flavian Rome, offering an important glimpse into Josephus’s own attempt to navigate the cultural and political anxieties of the capital city shortly after the tumultuous demise of the Julio-Claudian regime.

**IDEOLOGIES OF GENDER IN THE ROMAN MEDITERRANEAN**

Before examining the nexus of effeminacy and tyranny in *B.J.*, it is perhaps necessary to reflect on the larger issue of gender within the Roman world. To speak of effeminacy as a gender-“deviant” trait presumes, of

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course, a gender “norm” by which an individual’s status could be measured. Defining this norm, however, is a complicated matter, in part due to the tendency to read into the past modern Western perceptions of gender, that is, to presuppose—usually on the basis of an essentialist, transcultural definition of gender deriving from observed differences in external genitalia—a fundamental continuity between antiquity and the present. Recent scholarship has called into question this supposition of continuity, underscoring instead the fundamental alterity of ancient concepts of gender and, moreover, the inextricable link between such gender systems and their particular sociocultural contexts. In other words, scholarly approaches have increasingly viewed gender as a fluid, contextually determined phenomenon, and as such, an issue that is more a matter of ideology than simple biology.

The idea of gender as a cultural system rather than a biological given has led to the recognition that the modern binary model of gender, rooted in a taxonomy of permanent, anatomically determined opposite sexes, is perhaps inappropriate for the ancient Mediterranean world. This is not to suggest that biological sex played no role in ancient conceptions of gender, but that the presence or absence of certain types of external genitalia constituted only one part of a vast and complex array of gender signifiers. Moreover, it is now widely agreed that gender in antiquity was viewed, at least from the perspective of the surviving male elite literary sources (an important qualification indeed!), through a single-gender, and not surprisingly androcentric, conceptual framework. Virginia Burrus’s recent assessment of the current state of scholarship is worth noting in this regard:

4. On essentialism and constructionism, see Marilyn B. Skinner, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture (Oxford, 2005), 8–10.


6. On the “one-sex model” of gender, see especially Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, 1990), 4–8, 25–62.
There is by now widespread scholarly agreement that gender in antiquity was mapped not as a binary of two fixed and “opposite” sexes (as is typical of our own modern western culture) but rather as a dynamic spectrum or gradient of relative masculinities. On the positively valorized end of the spectrum were “true men,” fully masculine; on the negatively valorized end, “true women,” lacking masculinity. For men, the challenge was to establish virility and to avoid sliding down the slippery slope of feminization.7

Thus, for example, Aristotle’s definition of the “male” as a perfectly formed human includes a logical corollary, namely, that the “female” represented a kind of natural defect or deficiency; in his words, a “female is like a defective (πέρον) male.”8 This notion of women as imperfect or defective men is perhaps most clearly apparent in the prevailing medical theory, evident especially in the various anatomical discussions by the second-century C.E. physician Galen, that postulated the female body as an underdeveloped inversion of the male body.9 As summarized by Giulia Sissa, “the womb was a scrotum, the ovaries were testicles, the cervix was a penis and the vagina was a long foreskin.”10 The impulse to view female anatomy through a male anatomical grid bespeaks this wider tendency to configure gender through a conceptual framework of masculinity.11

Moreover, if indeed anatomical equipment was not absolutely determinative of one’s place on the gender spectrum, then it stands to reason that masculinity itself was a tenuous state of existence that required more than

possession of a penis. According to Maud Gleason’s assessment, “man-
hood was not a state to be definitively and irrefutably achieved, but some-
thing always under construction and constantly open to scrutiny.”12
While there is little indication that men actually became (or thought they
could become) women, numerous sources do betray an awareness of the
possibility of gender slippage, the very real danger of sliding into the
much-maligned mediating category of effeminate male, of being infected
with, in the words of Philo of Alexandria, the “disease of effemination”
(noson thleian).13 Thus, when Galen comments on the possibility that heat
in the male body—that natural element which was thought to differenti-
ate male bodies from female bodies—could potentially cool, he was giving
voice to a deep-seated anxiety that “each man trembled forever on the
brink of becoming ‘womanish’ . . . It was never enough to be male: a man
had to strive to remain ‘virile.’ ”14
One crucial measure of an individual’s place on this spectrum of mas-
culinities, and indeed one important means of maintaining this desired
state of virile manhood, was the act of sex itself, or more precisely, the
role a male participant played in the act of sexual intercourse. Specifi-
cally, whether a male played the part of active penetrator or passive pene-
trated was absolutely critical in determining his state of masculinity.15
According to Craig Williams,

a Roman man who wished to retain his claim to full masculinity must
always be thought to play the insertive role in penetrative acts, whether
with males or females; if he was thought to have sought the receptive

12. Maud W. Gleason, Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient
13. Philo, Spec. 3.37. See Diana M. Swancutt, “‘The Disease of Effemination’:
The Charge of Effeminacy and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18–2:16),” in New
Testament Masculinities, esp. 194–205.
14. Galen, De semine 1.16; quote from Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men,
15. On the importance of the active/passive, penetrator/penetrated dichotomy,
see especially Dover, Greek Homosexuality, 81–91; Paul Veyne, “La Famille et
l’amour sous l’Haut Empire romain,” Annales (Économie, Sociétés, Civilisations) 35
(1978): 50, 52–53; Judith P. Hallett, “Roman Attitudes toward Sex,” in Civiliza-
tion of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome, ed. M. Grant and R. Kitzinger
Sexualities, 47–65; Jonathan Walters, “Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and
Impenetrability in Roman Thought,” in ibid., 29–43; Craig A. Williams, Roman
Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity (Oxford, 1999), 160–
224; Davidson, “Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality,” esp. 7–20.
role in such acts he forfeited his claim to masculinity and was liable to being mocked as effeminate.¹⁶

In other words, the gender “norm” — the fully masculine male (vir) — by which the “deviant” was measured required, among other things, an individual to maintain his status as phallic penetrator, regardless of the precise nature of the penetrated object. Indeed, as Holt Parker observes, Latin vocabulary for Roman sexual behavior fits this structural hierarchy with remarkable anatomical precision.¹⁷ “Normal” sexual behavior for a vir encompassed three orifices: the vir who penetrates the vagina (fututor), the vir who penetrates the mouth (irrumator), and the vir who penetrates the anus (pedicator/pevido). That a pedicator might penetrate a male anus, or an irrumator a male mouth, was of no consequence to the penetrator’s status as a vir. Conversely, the corresponding receptive behavior that did in fact compromise one’s status as a vir, placing him into the category of gender deviant, included performing oral sex on a female (cunnilinctor) or male (fellator) and receiving anal intercourse (pathicus or cinaedus).¹⁸

JOHN OF GISCHALA, TYRANNY, AND EFFEMINACY IN B.J.

Turning to B.J., the issue of effeminacy or gender deviancy, appearing exclusively in the central text of this investigation, is clearly part of a larger and more pressing problem for Josephus—tyranny, which emerges unambiguously as the central antagonist in his narrative. Indeed, it is tyranny that unleashes a chaotic rebellion (stasis) on Galilee and Judaea, ultimately culminating in the unfortunate destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And the reader quickly realizes that the apex of this tyranny resides not in some foreign despot, an autocratic “other” hell-bent on oppressing the Judaean people, but among the Ioudaioi themselves, a detail Josephus refers to as a lamentable paradox.¹⁹

As Josephus sets out in the prologue the main features of his narrative, he promises to recount how Judaean tyrants (Ioudaiôn tyrannoi), and not

¹⁶. Williams, Roman Homosexuality, 4.
¹⁸. In a similar vein, Skinner remarks: “When a man, playing the role of penetrator, inserts his penis into the vagina (futuere), the mouth (irrumare), or the anus (peidoare) of someone else, he performs a ‘normal’ sexual act. All other acts are abnormal and vile because the performer degrades himself in proffering his own body part to give someone else pleasure”; Skinner, Sexuality, 18.
¹⁹. Specifically, Josephus bemoans the paradoxical transformation of Jerusalem (tên paradoxou metabolês tên polis), whereby foreigners (allophoi) and adversaries (polemioi) must correct the impiety of the Ioudaioi (B.J. 6.102).
the Romans, ultimately bear responsibility for rendering the Temple a heap of ashes. In this vein, he explicitly anticipates what will become an important feature in his account of the war: a fundamental antithesis between Roman clemency and Judaean tyranny. This polarization, for example, is typified in Titus’s repeated attempts “to save the city and temple,” which stands in stark contrast to the “savage cruelty of the [Judaean] tyrants toward their own people.”

Of the seventy times a term from the tyrann- word group (tyrannos, tyrannis, tyrannéion, tyrannos, tyrannia, tyrannikos) appears in B.J., fifty-two are associated with the various Judaean revolutionary factions and/or leaders and only five explicitly refer to Romans. Moreover, although numerous Judaean rebels are singled out as “tyrants,” such as Menahem son of Judas and Simon son of Gioras among others, the concentration of references explicitly linked with John of Gischala is particularly noteworthy, marking this participant in the Judaean revolt as a paradigmatic tyrant in Josephus’s pantheon of tyrannical brutes.

This is not surprising, given that the demonization of Josephus’s former political rival is an important feature in this narrative. John emerges as a dark and devious villain, a demagogue inciting his band of brigands (lēstai) to revolution and anarchy, ultimately devastating the entire Galilean territory. For example, one of the first extended descriptions of John includes a generous serving of damnable character traits—for example, John was a “treacherous” (epiboulos) criminal who was “the

22. B.J. 1.27–29 (quote at 27).
23. Judeaenses: B.J. 1.10–11, 24, 27–28, 2.442, 447–448, 564, 652; 4.151, 158, 166 (2x), 172, 178, 208, 258, 278 (2x), 347, 389, 397, 401, 508, 564, 566, 569, 573; 5.5, 11, 169, 439; 6.98, 129, 143, 202, 227, 286, 323, 325, 345, 370, 379, 394, 399, 409, 412, 432; 7.32, 261, 265. Romans: 2.275–276 (Albinus), 294 (Florus); 4.595–596 (Vitellius). The remaining appearances are by and large linked with various ancillary figures, such as Zeno of Philadelphia (B.J. 1.60) and Marion the Tyrian (B.J. 1.238–239), inter alia.
24. B.J. 4.208, 389, 564, 566, 569; 5.5, 11; 6.98, 129, 143
most sly (panourgetatos) and deceitful (doliotatos)” among the infamous of Judaea/Galilee—combined with the accusation that he conscripted four hundred “fugitives” to “plunder the whole of Galilee.”26 Josephus repeatedly blames John for the civic strife and outbreak of rebellion, that is, the stasis and apostasis plaguing the region.27 Josephus similarly notes in book 7 that John had filled the country “with innumerable evils,” inflicting with his impiety (asebeia) a devastating blow on the stability of the Judaean state.28 However, besides representing the very antithesis of eusebeia, John’s most heinous crime, and that which most marks him as a terrifying and destructive monster, is his desire for absolute power, for tyranny:

Now by this time John was pursuing tyranny (tyranniao) and had begun to despise the equality he shared with others; so joining up with a faction of the more degenerate, he rebelled against the coalition. And by discounting the opinions of the others and issuing his own more despotic commands (despotikos), he was obviously staking out a claim for complete sovereignty (monarchia).29

In a similar vein, but of even more relevance to the present discussion, is an earlier description of John’s autocratic bent, which Josephus likens to a raging, irrational, and dangerously chaotic lust for sex, noting that “he carried in his soul a terrifying eros for tyranny.”30 The juxtaposition of eros and tyrannis was a familiar topos in Greek literature. In language that is strikingly similar to Josephus’ description of John, Herodotus remarks that Pausanias the Spartan possessed an eros to be tyrannos over all of Greece.31 As Bruce Thornton notes in his study of eros in Greek literature, the romanticized chubby little love-master of our Hallmark traditions fails to capture the fundamentally chaotic and destructive power of erotic desire: eros was a force that must be tamed and controlled, and it is but a small step from an unleashed erotic desire to an unrestrained

27. For example, in B.J. 4.84–85 John is said to have incited a mob of leotrikoi from the Galilee “into rebellion” (eis tìn apostasin).
31. Herodotus, Hist. 5.32. See especially the study by Thomas Harrison, who observes in Herodotus a “frequent association of sexual lust with the lust for tyranny or empire”; Thomas Harrison, “Herodotus and the Ancient Greek Idea of Rape,” in Rape in Antiquity, ed. S. Deacy and K. F. Price (London, 1997), 196.
lust for absolute power.\textsuperscript{32} When Plato spoke of erōs as an “indwelling tyrant”—erōs tyrantos endon oikōn—that can ultimately lead to the ruin of the state,\textsuperscript{33} he was thus giving voice to a widespread perception that unfettered sexual desires and an unrestrained political appetite were inextricably linked.\textsuperscript{34}

This brings us to the central passage for the present discussion, \textit{B.J.} 4.560–563, which paints a rather deliciously decadent portrait of John and his revolutionary faction, one that includes a very pointed accusation of cross-dressing and sexual passivity:

Now their [i.e., the rebels under John’s command] lust for plunder was insatiable; they ransacked the homes of the rich; they amused themselves in the murder of men and the abuse of women; they drank down their spoils along with blood, and with reckless abandon they played the part of a woman (enthelepateō) in their insolence, adorning their hair and putting on feminine clothing, bathing themselves in perfume and painting their eyelids for beauty. Moreover, not only did they beautify themselves [like women], but they even imitated the [sexual] passions of women (pathē gynaikōn emimounto), and through their excessive debauchery they contrived illicit sexual pleasures (athemitous epenōsan erōtas); and immersing themselves [in this decadence] as if in a brothel (porneion) in the city, they defiled the entire city with their impure deeds. But while they womanized (gynaikizō) their faces, they were murderous with their right hands, and while walking effeminately (thryptomenoi tois badismasin), they suddenly attacked and became warriors, and drawing their swords from beneath their dyed womanly garments (apo tōn bebammenōn chlanidōn), they lanced everyone they encountered.

The language in this passage is obviously hyperbolic and thus likely bears little resemblance to the historical figures portrayed in the episode.\textsuperscript{35} Yet when lobbing invectives at a bitter rival, historical accuracy rarely factors into the equation; what matters is the capacity of an invective to demonize an opponent, to transform the rival into a hideous monster. And Josephus

\begin{itemize}
  \item 32. Thornton, \textit{Eros}, esp. 11–47.
  \item 33. Plato, \textit{Rep.} 573d.
  \item 34. Thornton, \textit{Eros}, 46.
\end{itemize}
in this passage clearly shows himself a master of the art of invective, conjuring a rather repulsive vision of a blood-drenched sexual rampage. In so doing, he indicates in no uncertain terms who the main literary villains are in B.J.—John and his randy band of rabble rousers, who unleash the violent and destructive forces of eros on the cities of Galilee and Judaea, ultimately raping, as it were, the Judaeans state itself.

Josephus gathers together in one place a constellation of Roman vices—an unrestrained self-indulgence (incontinentia), manifesting itself especially in avaritia and excessive displays of blood-lust and libido, or licentia—whose cumulative effect is to cast John as a monster, a raging, uncontrollable tyrant. The rebels under John’s command are insatiably hungry for riches (pothos harpaqon apleroi), selectively targeting wealthy homes for plunder. Moreover, this pothos run amok is particularly evident in their pursuit of entertainment, taking an obscene delight in the murder of men—even to the point of imbibing the blood of their victims—and an unrestrained libido that includes charges of rape.

It is the topos of effeminacy, however, that takes center stage in this passage. Besides imbibing the blood of men and then raping their women, John’s army is said to have “played the part of a woman,” that is, to have participated in a woman’s experience, using the Greek verb enthelepateo. Although the present passage is the only occurrence of this particular term in Greek literature, it clearly derives from the compound verb thelypatheo, the basic meaning of which is fairly obvious in its constituent parts. The term should thus be understood within the context of a broad range of thely-words—for example, thelymos (“of womanish mind”), thelykos (“woman-like”), thelymorphos (“woman shaped”), thelytes (“womanish”), thelydras (“effeminate person”), thelyphanos (“like a woman”), thelytropos (“of womanish habit”), and thelynai (“make womanish; become soft”), among others—which function in part to convey effeminate qualities, characteristics, or behavior in men. And indeed, the ensuing description explicitly, and quite vividly, spells out the sense of enthelepateo: the rebels drenched themselves in perfume, dressed in drag, painted

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57. The term also reappears in a tenth-century citation of Josephus (Constantinus VII Porphyrogenitus, De virtutibus et vitiis 1.104.4).

58. Philodemus, Herc. 312.4.

their eyelids, and walked with a dainty gait. Their effeminate behavior, however, was not restricted to appearance or aroma but instead reached its climax — pardon the pun — with an attempt to mimic the sexual passions of women (pathē gynaiκίν emimounto). That is to say, they willingly played the receptive role in sexual intercourse, pursuing what we might today call a homosexual experience, sexual pleasures (erōtes) from anal penetration.

There has, of course, been much discussion on the question of homosexuality in antiquity, and specifically whether or not “homosexual,” and its lexical partner “heterosexual,” are even appropriate categories for the ancient world, or whether we are speaking of a time before sexuality. Without attempting to wade through these murky waters, it is worth noting that although the literary antagonists in our passage clearly engage in what is presently categorized as homosexual behavior, that is, male-on-male sexual intercourse, a closer reading of this text indicates that the actual biological sex of the participants is really of no concern. Rather, Josephus censures, by means of his invective, transgressive gender behavior, or what Michael Satlow calls “gender blurring,” behavior that compromises masculinity. More specifically, in a world where gender was mapped not according to a taxonomy of fixed and clearly distinguishable “opposite” sexes but according to a hierarchy of phallic penetrators and their subordinate orifice receptors, the Gischalan cohort was guilty not of gay sex per se but of rendering themselves “not-men,” of failing to maintain their proper place on a gendered “social pyramid.”

This is, on the one hand, transparently manifest in the inclusion of stereotypical traits of effeminacy, namely the cross-dressing, excessive beautification, and effeminate walking, which Quintilian, among many others, identified in the late first century C.E. as “signs (signa) of one who


42. Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 41.
is *mollis* [i.e., soft or womanly] and not sufficiently manly (*parum viri*).”\(^43\)

But the rather explicit language of sexual passivity and receptivity confirms that gender deviancy, and not homosexuality per se, is in view here. The Greek phrase used by Josephus, *pathē gynaikōn*, approximates the Greek term *kinaidōs*—typically denoting one who eagerly pursues anal penetration—and the Latin *pathicus*, as well as the closely related Latin phrase *muliebria pati*,\(^44\) which could be roughly translated as “partaking in a woman’s [sexual] experience,” that is, being (anally) penetrated.\(^45\)

Josephus thus censures his literary antagonists not for engaging in sexual acts with other men as such but for submitting to penetration by other men. It was their status as *kinaidōi* that rendered them morally bankrupt.

**EFFEMINATE PATHICS AND THE POLITICS OF MASCULINITY IN ROMAN DISCOURSE**

As noted earlier, Josephus’s accusation of effeminacy and sexual passivity draws deeply from the well of Roman political invective. Roman moralists frequently appealed to a catalogue of effeminate beautification rituals and characteristics in order to cast a dark shadow of suspicion over a rival or political enemy. In the second century B.C.E. Scipio mocked P. Sulpicius Gallus as “one who daily perfumes himself and dresses before a mirror, whose eyebrows are trimmed, who walks abroad with beard plucked out and thighs made smooth.”\(^46\) Tacitus similarly raises the specter of cross-dressing effeminacy when he ridicules Otho’s claim to the imperial throne: “Was it by his bearing and gait or by his womanish dress (*muliebri ornatu*) that he deserved the throne?”\(^47\)

But the preferred target for ridicule, and what thus constituted one of the most potent rhetorical weapons in Roman antiquity, was the *pathicus/kinaidōs*, the penetrated male. Indeed, Martial’s epigrams are satu-

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\(^45\) Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 30. See, for example, Sallust’s description of “men who partook in the experience of women (*viri muliebria pati*), behavior that he censures as an immoral passion (Sallust, *Cat*. 15.3).


rated with censures of male passivity. Likewise, Catullus’s sixteenth poem, although perhaps formally not an invective, evinces a volley of accusations centered on charges of effeminacy and sexual passivity. In fact, the very raison d’être of the poem is an accusation that Catullus himself had slipped into the category of effeminate male. To defend himself against this charge, Catullus need only claim his willingness to penetrate anally or orally—*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*—his male accusers (dubbed in the poem Aurelius the *pathicus* and Furius the *cinaedus*), a rhetorical maneuver that both emasculated his rivals while simultaneously enhancing his own masculinity. Juvenal similarly underscores the rhetorical potency of the pathetic invective when he unleashes his satirical fury on the hypocritical Stoics of Rome, noting that although externally they put on an appearance of Stoic moderation and manliness, in reality they possess “the most notorious digging holes (*notissima fossa cinaedos*) among Socratic pathics.”

In both of these instances, and Catullus and Juvenal are certainly not alone, masculinity is defined not by the biological sex of the sexual partner but by the role of the participants in the sexual act: reception invariably revokes one’s claim to masculinity. Moreover, it is clear that this language of sexual penetration and reception played a critical role in Roman public discourse, functioning both as a weapon of abuse against rivals, be they political or philosophical, and as an important instrument for “self-presentation.” Josephus’s charge of transgressive gender behavior should thus be viewed partially in this light, namely, as a personal insult aimed at his arch rival, a humiliating blow that functioned to emasculate, and in some sense dehumanize, John, since to be fully human was to be fully masculine. Moreover, insofar as Josephus repeatedly presents himself as the antithesis of John, the paragon of a virtuous and moderate general, we should probably assume that reflected in this anti-John invective is a rather self-serving encomium, an inverted celebration of the author’s own manliness.

49. Catullus, 16.
But this only partially captures the import of this text. Indeed, there is an additional layer to this discourse, one that raises the stakes a bit by underscoring the broader sociopolitical dimensions of gender identity in the Roman Mediterranean. As noted earlier, the image of "Eros unleashed" had long played a central role in defining and disparaging tyrants in Greek literature. And insofar as effeminacy and sexual passivity had come to represent the quintessential expression of an unbounded eros, many Roman moralists imagined that lurking beneath the surface of effeminate behavior was a hideous monster threatening to devastate civic order and stability.

The nexus of tyranny, civic disorder, and effeminacy—or more generally an unleashed libido—appears frequently in late Republican sources, typified in Cicero's claim that Verres was a "lustful and cruel tyrant" (tyrannum libidinosum crudelemque). Indeed, numerous invectives preserved in Cicero's literary corpus level charges against those whose excessive licentiousness was thought to have weakened the Roman state. To take but one example, Cicero accuses Publius Clodius of wreaking havoc on the senate and the Republic of Rome by "satisfying the lusts of . . . Barbarians" as a grown adult. In other words, by defying the proper boundaries of Roman masculinity in receiving anal penetration from non-Romans, Publius Clodius not only damaged his own reputation as a vir but he undermined the very stability of the state itself. Similarly, the early imperial historian Velleius Paterculus, in his account of the late Republican tribune Gaius Curio, likens the tribune's reckless and insatiable appetite for perverse pleasures to a burning torch enflaming civil war and the subversion of the state.

However, the rhetorical specter of a gender-deviant tyrant perhaps loomed largest in the wake of the political chaos surrounding the demise of the Julio-Claudian regime—the precise context of Josephus's literary career. Rumors of transgressive gender behavior attached to several

52. As noted in Gleason's suggestion that the gender deviancy of the rebels bespeaks a corruption of the body politic; Gleason, "Mutilated Messengers," 70.

53. Anthony Corbeill speaks of the "social danger of effeminacy" when he discusses the tendency in Roman invectives to link private profligacy with public threats to the state; Anthony Corbeill, "Dining Deviants in Roman Political Invective," in Roman Sexualities, 109.

54. Cicero, Verr. 2.1.82.


Julio-Claudian emperors, many of which were immortalized in the pages of Suetonius’s *De vita Caesarum*, likely gained widespread currency in Rome during the early years of the Flavian period. Caligula, for example, was reportedly on the giving and receiving end of sexual intercourse with a host of adult men. Likewise, Otho, rumored to have been Nero’s one-time lover, was famously thought to be an obsessive cross-dresser, and was explicitly identified as a pathic by Juvenal. And of course, as noted at the outset of this investigation, Nero holds a privileged place in this hall of deviant fame, emerging from the sources as a raging madman whose erotic cravings included role-playing as the wife of his freedman, even to the extent of imitating the screams of a virgin while being penetrated by “her” husband.

The emphasis in these sources, however, is not simply on gender deviancy as a character flaw in a tyrant but on the capacity of effeminate emperors and other political figures to emasculate the state, as it were, to weaken, and ultimately endanger, Roman hegemony. It is thus not at all surprising that charges of effeminacy are often linked to moments of political vulnerability, such as the waning decades of the Republic or the tumultuous years before the Flavians could once again flex Rome’s masculine muscle. In other words, discourses on transgressive gender behavior played an integral role in articulating Roman imperial ideology. The language of penetration conveyed the politically charged image of domination and subjugation; and conversely, receptivity or passivity betrayed political weakness and vulnerability.

62. This is likewise the case in the Greek period. Indeed, the famed fifth-century B.C.E. Eurymedon vase, which depicts a Greek with his erect penis in right hand approaching a bent over man in Persian garb, nicely encapsulates the geopolitical dimensions of gender in Greco-Roman antiquity. According to Dover, this vase proudly announces, “We’ve buggered the Persians!” (Greek Homosexuality, 105). Technically, as James Davidson has observed, the buggering on the vase has yet to occur; thus, at most the vase proclaims, “We have high hopes of buggering the Persians!”; James Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (New York, 1997), 171. In either case, the geopolitical implications of the image are clear. See also the discussion in Paul
This dynamic is poignantly captured in Cassius Dio, who underscores Rome’s susceptibility under Nero by juxtaposing, with a healthy dose of irony, Boudicca’s masculinity with Nero’s effeminacy. In her prebattle prayer to the goddess of the Britons, Boudicca notes that even the women and children of her own nation possessed the noble valor of men (ἀρετὴν ἔχουσόν), in contrast with the Romans, who had come to embody the softness of their emperor.63 And indeed, as the narrative unfolds, the Romans, at least in the short run, suffered an “unspeakable slaughter.”64 The queen, it seems, could boast a more impressive phallic presence than her Roman counterpart, and thus, she was able to successfully “penetrate” the Roman state, at least momentarily.

On the other hand, the Flavian propaganda machine, which perhaps bears more responsibility for Nero’s effeminacy than even Nero himself, set out with great diligence to remasculinize Rome, to reestablish its place as an “impenetrable penetrator,” to borrow the words of Jonathan Walters.65 Vespasian’s reputed rustic moderation and legends of his attempts to restrain the licentious impulse of his soldiers—for example, Suetonius tells us that “he rejected with a toss of his head a young man who smelled of perfume”66—conveyed an unmistakable message: Rome’s imperial penis was once again fully erect, ready and able to penetrate any ethnos standing in its way.

Of course, that later Roman sources fixate on Flavian masculinity vis-à-vis Julio-Claudian effeminacy ought not obscure the central role of masculinity within Julio-Claudian imperial propaganda, a fact visually underscored by the iconography of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. This massive temple complex, constructed ca. 20–60 C.E. and dedicated to Aphrodite and the Julio-Claudian imperial family, included two portico structures (a north and south portico) flanking an east-west processional avenue leading up to the temple proper. Affixed to the second and third stories of the porticoes were a series of marble relief panels—approximately two hundred, of which about eighty have survived—

63. Cassius Dio, Rom. biot. 62.6.4.
64. Cassius Dio, Rom. biot. 62.7.1–3.
depicting Greek myths, emperors, and personified etnē of the Roman empire. Particularly relevant for the present discussion are the imperial reliefs on the third story of the south portico, which repeatedly bombard the viewer with images of nude, muscular emperors subjugating female etnē. For example, one panel depicts a naked Claudius about to deliver a final death blow to a partially nude Britannia. The portrayal of Nero’s conquest of Armenia is perhaps even more striking. In this panel, a nude Nero is holding up a slumping Armenia. The emperor towers over his victim, with his vividly muscular thighs straddling her soft naked body. Her slumped posture, juxtaposed with Nero’s exaggerated muscular presence, suggests not only military subjugation but sexual conquest; Nero—the very same Nero who would later come to embody the quintessence of effeminacy—has ravished Armenia. What matters, in this propagandistic game, is not the actual sexual proclivities of a particular emperor but the extent to which notions of masculinity functioned to articulate the strength of the emperor and state, regardless of which imperial family occupied the palace in Rome.

I submit that the language of transgressive gender behavior in Josephus should be understood within this larger context of Roman imperial ideology. Josephus was writing in a world literally saturated with visual, and thoroughly gendered, representations of Rome’s dominance, with Rome’s masculinity visibly juxtaposed with the femininity of the conquered etnē. Indeed, this contrast is especially evident in the vast corpus of Iudaea Capta coins, which repeatedly portray the Judaean ethnos as a subjugated woman. One version of this coin is particularly instructive: a large and imposing masculine representation of Rome stands over and looks down upon a small and fragile woman, Judaea. In the man’s left hand is a dagger with a decidedly phallic appearance, an impression that

70. Ibid., pl. 47.
is all the more enhanced by the dagger’s surely intentional placement—
protruding from the man’s groin in an upward direction. The meaning of
this scene is unmistakable: Rome’s mighty phallus has penetrated, and
hence subjugated, a feminized Judaea.73

When read in this light, the language of enthèlypathē and pathē gynaiōn
in Josephus not only defines John as a depraved, reckless, and dangerous
tyrant but it also functions in part as a narrative reenactment of the image
of Iudaea Capta. That is to say, the feminization of the Judaean rebels,
and their willingness, indeed eagerness to pursue anal penetration, por-
tends their role in the feminization of Judaea. When Josephus claims,
then, that the rebels transformed the polis into a brothel (pornē̇on), defiling
the entire city, he is not simply speaking in terms of moral corruption.
Rather, in the broader context of his narrative, he is here foreshadowing
the ultimate act of defilement, Rome’s penetrative destruction of Jerusa-
lem. John’s faction thus ultimately inflicts its gender-deviant disease on
the nation itself, causing Judaea to bend over, as it were, and submit to
Rome’s phallic dominance.

To conclude, I have argued that Josephus’s invective against John and
his rebel cohort should be read within a wider Roman discourse on trans-
gressive gender, both the tendency in political invective to cast tyrants as
effeminate objects of anal penetration, as well as the gendered power
structures integral to Roman imperial ideology. Effeminacy, and espe-
cially sexual passivity, were inextricably linked with an unrestrained lust
for power, and the urge to defy boundaries between the sheets, as it were,
betrayed a compulsion to disturb the political boundaries that ensure
civic and national stability. In one sense, then, this text bears the unmis-
takable imprint of a foreign (Judaean) author who has been living in the
shadow of Rome’s imperial dominance. Yet in another sense, it under-
scores the extent to which Josephus had absorbed the cultural categories
and assumptions of his conqueror, even employing this gender paradigm
to bolster his own claim to manliness. Josephus thus exploits not a homo-
phobic but perhaps a cinaedo-phobic or pathico-phobic current in Rome
to elicit a sympathetic ear, invoking for his Roman reader a familiar and
timely warning: effeminizing tyranny is like a disease, invariably infecting
the state with its passive inclinations. In so doing, Josephus underscores
just how alike Judaean and Romans really were. Both were afflicted
with a decadent and effeminate tyrant—Nero in Rome and John in Gala-

lee/Judaea. Both were then plagued by a consequent rebellion and civil war that threatened to undermine the very foundation of civic order, potentially destroying the state itself. In Rome’s case, however, effeminate decadence met its match with the Flavians, at least in the pre-Domitian era of B.J.; sadly, for Josephus, the Judaean state did not fare as well.
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