



THE SPARTAN CRUCIBLE*

As against the abiding popular image of the ever-dauntless Spartans, serious commentators have long recognized what a central part *fear* played in Lacedaemonian life: fear of the helots, fear of the laws, fear of defeat and dishonour and disgrace, without hope of respite this side of the grave. Yet the full implications of such a life, forever suspended most precariously ‘between shame and glory’ as Jean-Pierre Vernant put it, have not been drawn out, especially with respect to its supposed beneficiaries, the Spartiates, who were sacrificed to its merciless logic no less than those they were keeping under such brutal subjugation. This essay proposes to close the gap by fitting together the dispersed pieces and presenting a more comprehensive picture of the silent anxieties and hidden miseries of the vaunted masters of Sparta who purchased their dominion at so frightful a price, not only to others, but also to themselves.

Keywords: Sparta, fear, honour, disgrace, insecurity, helots, *agogé*, Thucydides

According to the story that the Spartans told themselves and the world, they were a people living under a uniquely ancient constitution of several hundred years’ standing that was supposed to be notable for its confirmed stability, all under an iron discipline that assured their preeminent standing as the best, most intrepid and valorous soldiers of their age. That traditional account has often been believed, and it would be too much to say that we now know it to be untrue; but enough cracks have appeared in its solemn façade, especially over the past thirty years, to make it look historically doubtful at best, and

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more than a little structurally shaky.¹ Even in the absence of the kinds of sources we might like to have, however,² or any corresponding certainty about what Spartan life was really like during its classical period, we may still, by piecing together what has long been said with newer readings of the evidence ‘against the grain’,³ arrive at reasonable if tentative conclusions about a fascinating and elusive society that was never quite as it wished to appear to others.

How dire a price was paid for the realities of Spartan life by the subjugated or subordinated majority of its population has never been in much doubt or danger of neglect; but how frightful the full consequences were of such a life *for the Spartiates themselves* – they too mere pawns in the perennial interplay of power and peril – has not always received enough attention. Nor was it just the dangers of the Spartans’ collective situation, but just as much, perhaps even

¹ Thucydides reckoned that Sparta had, by the end of the great war, possessed the same form of government for more than 400 years (1.18.1). Powell dismisses this ‘uncharacteristically credulous’ notion as a ‘grand Spartan falsehood’ peddled by ‘Spartan authorities nervously aware of the exact opposite, that their constitution was in fact neither old nor secure’ (A. Powell, ‘Mendacity and Sparta’s Use of the Visual’, in his [ed.] *Classical Sparta: Techniques Behind Her Success* [London, 1989], 186). See also n. 3.

² I can only acknowledge the rife methodological difficulties in this area, without much hope of resolving anything. The ‘synchronic’ approach that Kennell denounced to such lasting effect would indeed look as ‘absurd and demonstrably false’ as he makes it out to be if anyone really were in the habit of approaching Spartan society in so blithe a manner as to assume ‘that absolutely no change occurred for over half a millennium’ (N. M. Kennell, *The Gymnasium of Virtue* [Chapel Hill, 1995], 7). In fact, those more inclined to ‘methodological holism’ (as per Paul Cartledge’s kinder formulation in his review of *The Gymnasium of Virtue*, ‘Spartan Upbringing’, *CR* 47 [1997], 100) are not likely to claim much ascertained historical authenticity for their work; they will merely point out, in mitigation, that where so little can be known for sure we have no choice but to work with what we’ve got, inadequate as it may seem, and that we will have to suspend disbelief somewhere if we want to have anything to say (cf. P. Cartledge and P. Debnar, ‘Sparta and the Spartans in Thucydides’, in A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis [eds.], *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides* [Leiden, 2006], 560, on reading Thucydides ‘with charity’). Even inscriptions, by Kennell’s own admission, can provide only ‘a modicum of information, if squeezed correctly’ (Kennell, 27, italics added). And there’s the rub: some ‘squeezing’ seems quite inevitable whichever side of the methodological tube one may consider the most propitious. As for Kennell’s wider argument, I remain as unconvinced as Ducat that Plutarch, just because he happened to write in the Roman imperial period, could only have described what existed in his own times (cf. J. Ducat, *Spartan Education. Youth and Society in the Classical Period* [Swansea, 2006], xvi, with his references in n. 16, and 27–9, 161) and I too cannot help feeling that ‘when, at the end of his perilous enterprise, [Kennell] finally reaches the classical period, he has nothing much to say’ (*ibid.*, xvi, cf. Kennell, 7, on his method ‘bringing some losses in its wake’). For a qualified defence of reading ancient texts with a measure of credulity, see also D. Pellerin, ‘Winding Ways of Eros in Plutarch’s Sparta’, *HPT* 42 (2021), 196–8.

³ That is, by proceeding upon the recognition that the most strident assertions and exertions often hide fears to the very contrary, and that, with respect to the argument here, ‘Sparta’s fears, and thus Sparta’s history, are there to be discovered in her own propaganda’ (A. Powell, chapters 1 and 11 in his [ed.] *Companion to Sparta* [Hoboken, 2018], 1.15, italics added; cf. 1.18–19, 22, 11.294).

more, their equally precarious individual positions⁴ – above all for those with most to lose, at the very pinnacle of the Spartan pyramid of pride and privilege, who were at once the most shining products of their society and the first to be sacrificed, as individuals, to its collective ends. Behind the daunting front they presented to the world, all glittering bronze and scarlet,⁵ the Lacedaemonians hid dreads far deeper and darker than met the eye or could be allowed to speak even from the shadows.⁶ When their society was transformed beyond recognition, first by the sea-change of the Peloponnesian War, then by their defeat at the hands of the Thebans and the loss of roughly half their territory and practically all their subject populations, the former slaves may not have been the only ones liberated.⁷

I

The recognition that fear was one of the main axes on which Spartan life turned – quite central to Anton Powell's recent argument about the reconstruction of Spartan history from secrecy, lies, and myth⁸ – is not altogether novel, but a rediscovery, from a new angle, of an old argument.

⁴ Cf. G. E. M. Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London, 1972), 89 and 96, and P. A. Rahe, *The Spartan Regime* (New Haven, 2016), esp. 122, 'The Spartan perch was precarious, etc.', on the collective side, with Grundy, on the individual: 'The Spartan's life had to be sacrificed in order that it might be preserved' (G. B. Grundy, 'The Population and Policy of Sparta in the Fifth Century', *JHS* 28 [1908], 82).

⁵ Cf. A. Powell, 'Information from Sparta: A Trap for Thucydides?', in A. Powell and P. Debnar (eds.), *Thucydides and Sparta* (Swansea, 2021), 233 (with references).

⁶ Thus Grundy (n. 4), 82 (cf. 94–5): 'The Spartiate lived face to face with a danger so great that it would have been dangerous to confess its magnitude to the world. Sparta could not wholly conceal the truth, but she dare not let it all be known.'

⁷ Cf. H. Van Wees, 'Luxury, Austerity and Equality in Sparta', in A. Powell (ed.), *A Companion to Sparta* (Hoboken, 2018), vol. 1, 205, and the implication of D. Kagan, 'Sparta', lecture 9 of *Introduction to Ancient Greek History* (Open Yale Courses, CLCV205, Fall 2007), part 1.

⁸ See Powell (n. 3), 1.3–28, especially the extraordinary density of references to major Spartan fears on pp. 15–19, 22. The important reminder, so convincingly insisted upon by Powell, that Thucydides was facing a 'monumentally secretive' (Cartledge and Debnar [n. 2], 586), highly manipulative, and often outright mendacious society (cf. Powell [n. 1], 186 ['masters of deceit and secrecy'], 178–84, and [n. 3], 1. 8–10, 15, 24–27) was remarked upon by the historian himself with evident frustration (Thuc. 5.68.2) and forms an important part of the argument to be made here, especially in section VI. The most pressing question for us, however, in judging Thucydides' work, is not so much whether he was perhaps led on here or there, which may seem probable but of which we can never be sure either way; what we need to ask before all else is who could possibly have been better placed to look behind the façades than our Athenian exile with his ample military credibility, his excellent connections to both camps, his mixed politics and excellent reasons not to sympathize unduly with any of the contenders, and, above all, his self-awareness, disinclination to partisanship or lecturing and moralizing, and general acumen and astuteness (cf. Powell [n. 3], 1.7, 10, and [n. 5], 221, 254; Thuc. 1.22.3).

It was already widely mooted, even in ancient times, how much the character of Spartan society owed to living under the long shadow of the helot menace. According to Plato, the question was one of the most vexed and contentious subjects of discussion in his time,⁹ and many observers across the ages have likewise identified it as the cardinal fact about Sparta.¹⁰ All other Greek cities owned slaves, sometimes in considerable numbers, ‘but only the Spartans lived on top of a potentially active human volcano’.¹¹

Whatever structures or measures the Spartans adopted, as Thucydides and Aristotle intimated, they always had an eye to guarding against those they had enslaved, who were forever lying in wait for any disaster that might befall their masters, or any weak moment at all.¹² The Spartans ruled by terror, and they reaped what they sowed. ‘Holding, as it were, a wolf by the throat’, as George Grundy put it so memorably, they were condemned to unrelenting strain, forever prevented from letting their guard down even for an instant.¹³

Close to a century ago, Preston Epps showed in a seminal article how liable we would be both to misunderstanding the nature and misjudging the extent of Spartan courage if we approached it only by the public appearance of fearlessness that they wished to evoke and maintain in the eyes and minds of others. In reality, the Spartans may not have been a particularly intrepid people, he argued, but disposed to fear both individually and collectively, aware at all times of the grave and unabating threat both to their personal standing and to their security as a society.¹⁴

The very exactions of the Spartan system speak eloquently to how deep their apprehensions must have run, and the true triumph of

⁹ Pl. *Leg.* 776c.

¹⁰ Cf. Ste. Croix (n. 4), 89, and P. Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia*, second edition (London, 2002), 27.

¹¹ Ste. Croix (n. 4), 90. Cf. D. M. Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Context* (Oxford, 2018), 132–3: ‘Ste. Croix was not exaggerating when he characterized the Spartan citizen body as perched atop a human volcano... The helots could not be managed like any other slave population in Greece, and the methods of control the Spartans employed are a monument to brutal creativity.’

¹² Thuc. 4.80.3, Arist. *Pol.* 2.6.2 (1269a). On their chronic apprehensions, see also Thuc. 5.14.3.

¹³ Grundy (n. 4), 82–3. Cf. also Arist. *Pol.* 8.3.3 (1338b); Ste. Croix (n. 4), 91; Powell (n. 3), 1.19; J.-P. Vernant, ‘Between Shame and Glory’, in F. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals. Collected Essays* (Princeton, 1991), 241–2.

¹⁴ Epps speaks of the Spartans as ‘innately and essentially a most fearful people with a strong and perpetual tendency to become terrified and to act accordingly’ (P. H. Epps, ‘Fear in Spartan Character’, *CPh* 28 [1933], 12, cf. 25).

their institutions may lie in how effectively they first fed the fears, then forged them into a formidable spur to bravery (for to fail would not only be to fall into personal disgrace, but to jeopardize every other Spartan's safety as well). There can be no question of cowardice here, nor of irrationality or 'congenital disease':¹⁵ if courage consists not in the absence of fear, but in rising above it, then the Spartans may truly have been among the most courageous people in history; and if they were so noticeably fearful, it was because they had every reason to be afraid, in their great vulnerability, and to develop correspondingly aggressive counter-strategies.¹⁶ Nor were they unaware themselves of how central a part fear played in their midst, but rather inclined to give it a most prominent, even sanctified, place: 'They honour Fear, not as something harmful, like the supernatural powers that they seek to ward off, but because in their opinion the state is held together above all by Fear' (Plut. *Cleom.* 9.1).¹⁷

No doubt the Spartans were thinking first and foremost of the fear of the law, since they prided themselves especially on the idea that in their city, and there alone, the leading men were as awed as the most humble citizens by the majesty of the lawful magistrates and correspondingly eager to set an example by their obedience.¹⁸ At a deeper level too, though perhaps not so consciously, the Spartans must have been aware of what a crucial role fear played in uniting their small and beleaguered society *against an external enemy* – ever the most reliable and effective way of doing so. Indeed, one could go further and argue that the helot threat was by no means entirely unwelcome to the Spartans, because it could be used as a formidable tool not only for tightening their internal cohesion, but also for sharpening the severe demands for discipline and obedience that surrounded a Spartan on all sides throughout his life¹⁹ – in line with the classic maxim of military tactics whereby soldiers can be made to fight most fiercely, like most cornered creatures, with their backs to a wall.

¹⁵ Cf. P. Debnar, 'Βραδυτις Λακωνική: Spartan Slowness in Thucydides' *History*', in Powell and Debnar (n. 5), 23, 25, 29.

¹⁶ Cf. Powell (n. 3), 1.11, 15–19, 22, on the reciprocal relationship between Sparta's vulnerabilities and fears.

¹⁷ Trans. R. J. A. Talbert, *On Sparta* (London, 2005), 104.

¹⁸ Cf. Xen. *Lac.* 8.1–2; Thuc. 1.84.3; Hdt. 7.104.4; J. E. Lendon, 'Spartan Honor', in C. D. Hamilton and P. Krentz (eds.), *Polis and Polemos* (Claremont, 1997), 118.

¹⁹ Cf. M. M. Güntert, 'Sparta – ein Ethos im Widerstand gegen sich selbst', *Saeculum* 66/II (2016), 316, 318–24, 326, 331, 336; also Powell (n. 3), 1.16: 'They evidently had reason to fear that the highest military standards would *not* be maintained.'

Not that the Spartan project can be understood from the negative side only, in terms of fear alone. The *pride* of the Spartiates who could maintain themselves on this precarious perch must count for something: they were confident of being the best in the world, man-for-man at least, at what they thought mattered most – no small satisfaction in the life of a human being.²⁰ Nonetheless, if we contemplate how a Spartan already faced his first life-and-death ‘contest’ practically at birth, adjudicated by the callous hands of his elders;²¹ how his tribulations were abruptly intensified from the age of seven, to be kept at the highest pitch until he won the coveted prize of citizenship, yet never truly relaxed even afterwards;²² how small his share was of the commodious consolations of life, and how insecure his position at every step of the way;²³ then we may well wonder whether Sparta’s most shining exhibits, too, did not pay an inordinate price for the example that Sparta gave the world.

II

Spartan steadfastness before the enemy, however conspicuously displayed on many occasions, was not nearly as universal and certain as the image they carefully fostered might have suggested. When they faced circumstances other than, let alone contrary to, their plans and expectations, that is, anything that contravened their pronounced need for order and predictability, the Spartans were remarkable for how easily they could become unnerved and disheartened.²⁴

Xenophon’s contention that the Spartans fought especially well when in disorder ‘engenders unease in anyone familiar with Spartan military history’, as Noreen Humble has put it so inimitably.²⁵ When the carefully defined parameters of their inculcated battle manoeuvres

²⁰ Cf. Hdt. 7.104.4; Güntert (n. 19), 338; A. Powell, *Athens and Sparta*, second edition (London, 2001), 100.

²¹ P. Cartledge, ‘What Have the Spartans Done for Us?’, *G&R* 51 (2004), 173.

²² P. Cartledge, ‘The Politics of Spartan Pederasty’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 27 (1981), 21, 26–9. Kennell, too, emphasizes how long the journey was, and how high and potentially devastating the ever-present risk of failure: ‘The ruthless and ultimately self-defeating ethos of Spartan education allowed for no deficiencies’ (Kennell [n. 2], 132–4).

²³ Cf. Vernant (n. 13), 231 and 240, and Powell (n. 5), 258, on the purposive exaggeration of the possibility of failure at Sparta.

²⁴ Cf. Epps (n. 14), 24.

²⁵ Xen. *Lac.* 11.7; N. Humble, ‘Why the Spartans Fight So Well, Even if They Are in Disorder: Xenophon’s View’, in S. Hodkinson and A. Powell (eds.), *Sparta and War* (Swansea, 2006), 227.

did not fit, or no longer availed, the Spartans ‘could not cope other than by fighting to the death’.²⁶ Almost invariably, there is ‘something formulaic about Sparta’s modes of thought’, even if they cannot be called unintelligent or irrational.²⁷

Dramatic instances of confidence giving way, sometimes in the face of relatively minor difficulties or upsets, to a pervasive mood of anxiety and discouragement, hence to vacillation and inertia or the sudden abandonment of a policy earlier pursued with enthusiasm, were just as characteristic of the Spartans as were their more spirited moments.²⁸ Far from being confident in their own judgements, the Spartans depended, to a striking extent, on the reassurances of an established system around them and on things following a familiar course, and it has long been recognized that this had something to do with the peculiar manner in which they were raised: ‘The Spartans became trained very early to a fixed course of things, and as long as this system was permitted to function normally, they could go even unto death with equanimity. But let any circumstances arise that upset its machinery and they at once became panicky.’²⁹

Likewise in their collective measures, ‘it seems they felt the need for a policy once decided to be continually reaffirmed and approved by the actual course of events’.³⁰ Hence their well-attested reputation for extreme superstitiousness and a palpable nervousness with respect to anything that might be construed as inauspicious. To be confident in their course of action, the Spartans required the reassurance of oracles and good omens, the putative backing of the gods, in much the same way as they sought, all their lives, the approval of their worldly superiors.³¹ They depended on clear directives and fixed rules for their confidence, in other words; whether in their religious or their

²⁶ Humble (n. 25), 228–9.

²⁷ See Powell (n. 1), 173–5; (n. 3), 1.27, 11.292, 305; (n. 5), 221.

²⁸ S. Hodkinson, ‘Social Order and the Conflict of Values in Classical Sparta’, *Chiron* 13 (1983), 265–7, 269, 271, 273.

²⁹ Epps (n. 14), 14, cf. 26. Cf. especially Hodkinson (n. 28), 267 (cf. 272). To speak of a ‘childlike dependence on the approval of others’ may sound unduly harsh, but it is perhaps not altogether unwarranted (Powell [n. 20], 238).

³⁰ Hodkinson (n. 28), 273.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 273–6, especially 276: ‘Given their dependence upon continual affirmation of policies, divine support, the ultimate form of approval, was essential.’ Cf. also Paus. 3.5.8 (trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod, *Description of Greece*, vol. 2 [London, 1926], 33): ‘More than any other Greeks were the Lacedaemonians frightened by signs from heaven.’ Their failure to come to the other Greeks’ aid at Marathon was justified by religious scruples (Hdt. 6.106.3), and there were many instances when earthquakes, in particular, made them abandon their projects in mid-march. (On their seismic and helot terrors of c. 464, see esp. Thuc. 1.101.2, 1.128.1; cf.

political and military lives, they could feel at ease only within the chain of command, from the very top of which the gods gave their orders.³² As soon as a policy started running in any direction that might betoken a lack of divine approval, the Spartans were so quick to get discouraged, freezing in their tracks, turning on their heels, or refusing to give succour to their allies (or sometimes even to their own troops in the field), that it was a matter of common observation among friends and foes alike.

What others saw was the daunting appearance of an army undefeated for close to two centuries, certainly; but they also noticed the shadow lurking behind the apparent invincibility of the Spartans, namely a decided lack of dispatch and resolution when they were not abundantly reassured by a clear preponderance of power,³³ their typical slowness to act in the face of opportunities great and small,³⁴ and their difficulties with recovering their confidence, once shaken, even on the cusp of victory.³⁵

P. Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* [London, 2001], 149.) For related dreads, cf. Thuc. 3.89.1, 6.95.1, 8.6.5.

³² R. Parker, 'Spartan Religion', in A. Powell (ed.), *Classical Sparta. Techniques Behind Her Success* (London, 1989), 160, 162.

³³ Their slowness to respond, during the fifty years after the defeat of Persia, to the Athenians' rise in power was commonly attributed, by Thucydides for one, to their traditional reluctance to go to war 'except under the pressure of necessity' (Thuc. 1.118.2), and their unwillingness to court danger except where reassured by a decisive superiority of power was thought such a marked trait of the Spartans that the Athenians could use it as an argument for crushing the hopes of their desperate Melian colonists (Thuc. 5.107, 109).

³⁴ Cf. Thuc. 8.96.5. Epps speaks of 'their notable reluctance to begin war together with a like indifference in prosecuting it' (Epps [n. 14], 18, with plenty of instances cited on pp. 19–21). Consider especially Thuc. 2.18, 3.29.1, 4.108; Agis' failure to do anything noteworthy with 'the finest Hellenic army every yet brought together' (Thuc. 5.60.1–3); and perhaps above all else, the Spartans' tarrying before finally sending support to Syracuse, which very nearly led to the surrender of the city (Thuc. 6.103.3). Such episodes can be variously interpreted, of course, and Paula Debnar's challenges to what she calls the 'monochromatic' perspective (Debnar [n. 15], 36) are astute and worth pondering, even to the detriment of my argument here. To the Spartans themselves, their own caution might with some justification have appeared a virtue: hence Archidamus' argument that their slowness and procrastination were not weaknesses but warlike marks of a wise moderation (Thuc. 1.84.1–3; cf. Debnar [n. 15], 25 and 40, on the much-criticized 'slowness' of the Spartans as sound strategy and 'intelligent good sense'). Concessions will also need to be made, no doubt, to Powell's forceful argument that the Spartans were not so much slow to act as careful to choose their moment – that is, to act in accordance with military opportunity, or *kairós*. Since their strategy principally amounted, in Powell's telling, to a predisposition for attacking only in moments of signal weakness on the other side, however, one may perhaps observe (as against what savvy and economy may have to say, cf. Powell [n. 3], 11.302, 305; [n. 5], 235) that courage and valour are not as a rule understood thus in the world, and that Sparta's friends and foes alike might have found something to complain about if such an opportunist's eye for the weaknesses of others was really what the vaunted Spartan military spirit came down to in the end (cf. Powell [n. 1], 183, 186; [n. 3], 1.5, 26–7 ['consistent collective mentality'], 11.298, 302, 305–6; [n. 5], 234, 236, 239–40).

³⁵ Cf. Thuc. 6.16.6, 6.88.10, 6.91.4–7, 6.93.1.

Shared interests alone, not sympathy or affection, made allies of Sparta and her temperamental opposite – maritime and commercial, cosmopolitan and pleasure-loving Corinth – and recriminations flung towards Laconia from the isthmus must be understood in that light.³⁶ Nor should any observations of this kind detract from the fact that the Spartans were, on occasion, quite capable of acting with great dispatch and resolve, as Paula Debnar and Anton Powell rightly insist.³⁷ Still it remains telling that what the Corinthians attributed to the Spartans, from up close, was not so much outstanding fortitude as conspicuous lack of boldness, unwillingness to take risks, diffidence in their strength, distrust of their own judgements, and a marked propensity towards unwarranted despondency and despair – to the point where they could get so unnerved by reverses that they were practically paralysed by the fear that *any move they might make would turn out a mistake*, as Thucydides so aptly described one of their moments of ‘great consternation’.³⁸

III

The military might of the Spartans rested partly on their carefully cultivated, decidedly incomplete, but highly effective *reputation* for indomitable valour and invincibility in the field,³⁹ and partly on the real edge that their relative professionalism gave them, for a time at least, in an age of incidental soldiering – an advantage that in turn depended on the relentlessness of their specialized training for hoplite warfare.⁴⁰ But there was an underside to this formidable public image: the deeply-felt necessity, concealed underneath the bravado, to remain at all times untouchable or risk perdition.⁴¹

³⁶ Cf. Debnar (n. 15), 23.

³⁷ Debnar provides plenty of convincing instances when Spartan ‘slowness’ has been exaggerated, and I have no objection to such astute corrections of received perceptions. As she concedes herself, however, her argument does *not* go so far as to ‘deny that the Spartan character, upbringing, and institutions inclined them to excessive deliberateness and caution’ (Debnar [n. 15], 41).

³⁸ See Thuc. 1.70.2–3. For other moments when the Spartans became strikingly unnerved, see Thuc. 4.55.3–4, 5.66.1–2, and Xen. *Hell.* 1.1.23.

³⁹ Cf. Powell (n. 3), 1.12 (cf. 1.21, 26, 11.309): ‘Sparta’s reputation on the battlefield was a precious military and political asset, useful for demoralizing the opponent’.

⁴⁰ Cf. Arist. *Pol.* 8.3.4 (1338b) and *The Works of Lord Macaulay*, edited by Lady Trevelyan (London, 1866), 7.671.

⁴¹ Cf. G. Rechenauer, ‘Körper und Macht: Zur Konzeption der Körperlichkeit im antiken Sparta’, in V. Pothou and A. Powell (eds.), *Das antike Sparta* (Stuttgart, 2017), 25–6.

Practically from the day he was born, the prospective Spartiate entered upon a merciless obstacle course that might lead him, after long years of exceptionally intense competitive struggle, to the coveted prize of full citizenship, and thence, perhaps, to the glories that lay beyond.⁴² But if he could thus hope, one fine day, to join the ranks of the Spartan ‘elect’,⁴³ it was only by enduring and prevailing against the myriad anxieties (familiar from the putative elect in other contexts) of having to prove himself worthy, every moment of his closely supervised life, in an arena where there was no hiding and no retreating, and where he could never get the reassurance he so desperately craved for more than a fleeting instant.

The aspiring Spartiate lived ‘continually under the gaze of others, spied on, controlled, judged, and punished...*The eye of the city, multiplied, was constantly on him*’.⁴⁴ Whether hardiness in the unceasing toils of their training or courage before the enemy, the boys and men of Sparta acquired it all ‘from the fact that they were under such constant supervision and in such fear of punishment’.⁴⁵ Even festivals were closely watched affairs, and rituals of reversal and disorder that served as much-needed safety valves in other societies were for the Spartan only further testing grounds for proving himself a true Spartiate, *not any relief from being one*.⁴⁶

It is worth pausing over Richer’s sobering remark that the values of Spartan society might properly be said to have been ‘hammered in’, and that coming of age there almost certainly meant close to twenty years of being frequently hit by other Spartans, indeed by any adult who saw fit to do so – with truly savage beatings not uncommon, often at the hands of one’s peers, and even accidental deaths by no means unheard-of.⁴⁷

⁴² Cf. Cartledge (n. 22), 21, 28 and (n. 21), 172–3; Powell (n. 3), 11, 295; Vernant (n. 13), 240. Also Ducat’s ‘seething with competitiveness, from top to bottom’ (Ducat [n. 2], 172).

⁴³ Cf. Vernant (n. 13), 230.

⁴⁴ Vernant (n. 13), 240, italics added; cf. Plut. *Lyc.* 16.5. Davies speaks of the Spartan upbringing as ‘a platform for observation’ and points out that by the age of twenty, a Spartiate youth would have been closely supervised by more than fifty educational officers (P. Davies, ‘Equality and Distinction within the Spartiate Community’, in A. Powell [ed.], *A Companion to Sparta* [Hoboken, 2018], vol. 2, 484, 489). See also Ducat (n. 2), 162: ‘Education took place manifestly under the gaze of the whole city’.

⁴⁵ Humble (n. 25), 224–5.

⁴⁶ Parker (n. 32), 152. Even Kennell, though arguing in a very different spirit, concedes that what the Spartans learned was essentially ‘to feel comfortable as small cogs in a big machine’ (Kennell [n. 2], 121).

⁴⁷ Cf. N. Richer, ‘Spartan Education in the Classical Period’, in A. Powell (ed.), *A Companion to Sparta* (Hoboken, 2018), vol. 2, 534–5. On being beaten half to death by other boys, see Plut. *Lacaen. Apoph.* 240f (Gyrtias 1). On accidental killings, cf. Xen. *An.* 4.8.25. Ducat sees ‘no serious

Spartan pedagogics abounded in crass animal analogies suggesting that boys were meant to be physically subdued as a matter of course and by the harshest means. In Plutarch the *agogé* is likened to breaking in horses as young as possible,⁴⁸ and the literal meaning of the ‘troops’ into which the boys were divided was nothing other than ‘herds’ (*boúai*), or more specifically, *herds of cattle*.⁴⁹ It may be, as Kennell argues, that the segregation of the ephebes in particular, when they were ‘put beyond the pale’, should be understood symbolically, not only physically; but even Kennell’s account emphasizes ‘the ferocity that life with his age-mates inculcated in the Spartan youth’ during a period of ‘utter, yet contained, depravity’ before the wildness was finally reined in again and contained by standards of civil behaviour.⁵⁰ And while Ducat is surely right that the very distresses of the boys, relentlessly brought home even by their names, contained the promise of a very different status one day, it was after all only a *promise*, and one that for many, quite possibly for most, would have proved empty.⁵¹

Of course we cannot be entirely sure whether the Spartan education really was as savagely brutal as it has been conventionally depicted; just because Plutarch and Xenophon said so does not make it so.⁵² But the

reason’ to believe that physical punishments were unusually harsh in Sparta, but his scepticism requires ‘not taking literally’ what Xenophon has to say and not giving much weight to the more informal ‘punishments’ meted out in fights (Ducat [n. 2], 162–3).

⁴⁸ See Plut. *Ages*. 1.2, cf. Pl. *Leg.* 666e.

⁴⁹ Cf. Talbert (n. 17), 227, Cartledge (n. 31), 83, and his *The Spartans. An Epic History*, revised edition (London, 2013), 28. Whether the term in question is classical in origin has, like so much else, been much debated (cf. Kennell [n. 2], 38, 120; Ducat [n. 2], 78; Richer [n. 47], 528). To see ‘pastoral imagery’ here (Kennell [n. 2], 38) is surely to miss the tenor of such designations, however long-established they may or may not have been.

⁵⁰ Kennell (n. 2), 124–5, 129; see also his comparison with American street gangs, p. 146. There is much to think about in Kennell’s interpretation of the violence and deprivation visited upon the young Spartans as largely a stylized affair that should be understood in terms of a complex set of religiously sanctioned rituals of initiation (Kennell [n. 2], 71–6, 123, 128, 142). According to Kennell, the Spartan boys must have only stolen at particular times, for example, and not whenever they could, because continual thievery would have been too subversive of so structured a society; likewise, they went barefoot and were made to fast, not as a matter of soldierly hardiness, as has traditionally been thought, but on religious occasions. Yet the whole point of the boys’ stealing, as it is presented in Xenophon, was that they must not let themselves be caught, presumably as part of their training in cunning for war (cf. Powell [n. 1], 185–6, Ducat [n. 2], 9–10; for some difficulties presented by the ‘military interpretation’ of Spartan education, see Ducat [n. 2], 139–47; for more on the stealing regimen, Ducat [n. 2], 201–7).

⁵¹ Ducat (n. 2), 75.

⁵² A nicely nuanced account is offered by Ducat (n. 2), 333: ‘All this was only a part of the reality: the most sensational part, certainly, and the most distinctively Spartan, but not necessarily the most important’ (cf. also Ducat [n. 2], 25–7 on how to think of Plutarch). Although he doubts that punishments in Sparta were as harsh as the infamous ‘whip-bearers’ might suggest, he does

reverse holds as well: just because more recent scholars are inclined to doubt much of the traditional picture does not make it *not so*. We need to accept that there is very little we can know for certain when it comes to Sparta, and while caution with respect to the sources is only prudent, the further we go in that direction, the harder we will find it to say much that is worth hearing. If Plutarch is found wanting because his was an imaginative reconstruction coloured by literary artistry,⁵³ if his self-awareness about the complexity he was struggling with be neither here nor there,⁵⁴ and if the limitations of his time-bound perspective leave him unworthy of belief, then where does that leave us, with our own prejudices and preoccupations, at a much greater remove still, both culturally and temporally, and with source material incomparably narrower than what he had at his disposal?⁵⁵

IV

Meanwhile, as the Spartan was expected to prove himself without end, the space for doing so was exceedingly cramped – not for incidental reasons, but as a direct reflection of the nature of hoplite warfare itself.

The precise dynamics of hoplite battle have been so ably dissected that they need not be belaboured here. Yet, whatever may need to be conceded to revisionist challenges with respect to the hoplite battle order not being as rigid as it has often been depicted, the core of the old orthodoxy still stands. Hoplite fighting presented the warrior hungering after glory with a daunting paradox: even if there may have been some occasions where he might get a chance to step out of line and distinguish himself with individual acts of heroism, for the most part he could only seek to surpass others while *remaining in line* so as not to leave his neighbour's flank exposed.⁵⁶

That the fear of being left unprotected was a central feature of hoplite engagement is not only attested to by the famous passage in Thucydides about the tendency of an army's right wing to drift

not dispute that it was an 'education for violence' that 'took place in an atmosphere of physical brutality and near-savagery' (Ducat [n. 2], 207–14).

⁵³ Kennell (n. 2), 34.

⁵⁴ Cf. Plut. *Lyc.* 1.1, 3, 'such a muddle' or 'such a maze'.

⁵⁵ As against Kennell (n. 2), 23–4, 32.

⁵⁶ Cf. J. F. Lazenby, *The Spartan Army* (Mechanicsburg, 2012), 4, 47.

(5.71.1), it is also a matter of common sense and something that was reflected in the conspicuous prestige, even as a philosophical metaphor, of remaining at one's post at any cost.⁵⁷ Orthodoxy or not, there can be little doubt that a hoplite phalanx was indeed, like the proverbial chain, only as strong as its weakest link, and that therefore 'the hoplite's supreme test was to remain "in rank"'.⁵⁸ Paul Cartledge's vivid image of 'co-ordinated mass infantry manoeuvres in which eight-deep shield walls bulldozed the enemy off the field of battle or terrorized them into giving up and running away' may be a tad overdrawn, but it is far from groundless and goes a long way towards illustrating why neither conspicuous intelligence nor outstanding individual skill could have been the measure of a man at Sparta.⁵⁹

Whoever broke free of these constraints, however valiantly, failed in his most important responsibility and was emphatically denied the highest honours. It may be going a little too far to say, as Vernant does, that extraordinary individual exploits like that of Aristodemos at Plataea had *no* value at all in the Spartan perspective;⁶⁰ yet the merits of such wild heroics were certainly discounted very steeply, irrespective of whether they came off well, not only because they were seen as expressions of self-destructive fury bordering on madness, but, even more importantly, because they represented inexcusable acts of irresponsibility towards the group, that is, towards those left unprotected in the line.⁶¹

Hence, in order to be the best at Sparta, one had to square the circle and 'surpass the others while remaining with them, making common cause with them, being like them'.⁶² In other words, the nature of hoplite fighting largely precluded the very distinction that it kept demanding from men among whom their training had sowed the

⁵⁷ Pl. *Ap.* 28e–29a being perhaps the most famous instance. Since the Spartan soldiers were sworn to the other members of their unit with an oath to the gods, any stepping out of line might even be construed as an act of impiety (cf. A. J. Bayliss, 'Using Few Words Wisely? "Laconic Swearing" and Spartan Duplicity', in S. Hodkinson [ed.], *Sparta. Comparative Approaches* [Swansea, 2009], 233).

⁵⁸ See P. Krentz, 'The Nature of Hoplite Battle', *Cl. Ant.* 4 (1985), 59, and Cartledge (n. 31), 161–2.

⁵⁹ P. Cartledge, 'Hoplites and Heroes: Sparta's Contribution to the Technique of Ancient Warfare', *JHS* 97 (1977), 15–16.

⁶⁰ Vernant (n. 13), 220; cf. Hdt. 7.231. 9.71.2–4.

⁶¹ See E. David, 'Suicide in Spartan Society', in T. J. Figueira (ed.), *Spartan Society* (Swansea, 2004), 26, 36; Lazenby (n. 56), 72–3. Cf. also Powell (n. 3), 1.15: 'The individual "similar" had to be ready to die for the community, but only as carrying out collective activity as ordered'.

⁶² Vernant (n. 13), 220.

seeds of a permanent, if also ambivalent, rivalry.⁶³ No wonder, then, that those who did stand out were subject to a remarkable degree of jealousy and distrust.⁶⁴ The surest way for a Spartan to break through the paradox, one might grimly conclude with Jon Lendon, was by ‘the honourable victory of the dead over the living in the great Spartan contest of obedience’ – that is, by dying in the line and thereby earning himself the morbid distinction of a marked grave.⁶⁵ ‘Sparta knew how to exploit the memory of dead heroes’, as Anton Powell has put it, whereas ‘living ones might get out of hand’.⁶⁶

Even maternal love appears to have been ‘placed under martial law’ at Sparta,⁶⁷ where mothers were famous, or infamous, for how mercilessly they harangued their sons even unto death. Of the forty short *Sayings of Spartan Women* that have come down to us, three are about mothers killing their sons for alleged cowardice, five about telling them to die if they did not measure up, and one about a mother denying that such a son could possibly be hers.⁶⁸ Grandmothers, too, it appears, did not soften appreciably with age, and seeing a grandson brought home after a near-fatal beating by his pals might be occasion for the charming observation that there was no cause for grief since the young man had ‘shown what kind of blood was in him’.⁶⁹ Aphrodite herself, the most unwarlike of the gods, who in the *Iliad* is

⁶³ Vernant (n. 13), 239–40. Also Xen. *Lac.* 4.4–6, especially his lively description of the brawls between contenders for membership in the elite corps of the Three Hundred.

⁶⁴ Thus Thuc. 4.108.7. Cf. Cartledge (n. 22), 28, ‘Sparta was a quintessentially agonal society, permeated with ambition, envy, and distrust’, and Hodkinson (n. 28), 279, ‘Individuals of outstanding energy and ambition were a threat’. See also Powell’s reflections on how shabbily the Spartans often treated their leading generals (Powell [n. 20], 103–6; cf. [n. 3], 11.295: ‘The very military virtues that Sparta required and revered tended to bring their most noted possessors to destruction’).

⁶⁵ Lendon (n. 18), 120; cf. Plut. *Lyc.* 27.2, Rechenauer (n. 41), 22–3. The classical method of honouring fallen heroes was collective interment in a public tomb on the battlefield, with a monument erected at public expense (van Wees [n. 7], 222–3). The remains of Leonidas, however, are said to have been brought home about forty years after his famous last stand, and Pausanias tells of a conspicuous tomb and a slab inscribed with the names of all who had fallen beside him at the Thermopylae (3.14.1). Given that the Sparta of Pausanias’ day had been transformed into a prominent tourist attraction, one may doubt the historical authenticity of these showy displays; even so, it is clear that the Spartans dwelt all their lives amidst countless memorials and markers dedicated to the slain heroes of the past – and none else, save their gods and demi-gods, and a few legendary figures. Kennell speaks of a ‘cult of the dead at Sparta’ (Kennell [n. 2], 139; cf. Powell [n. 1], 181, [n. 5], 244).

⁶⁶ Powell (n. 3), 11.313.

⁶⁷ F. B. Jevons, ‘The Spartan Constitution’, in *A Manual of Greek Antiquities*, second edition (London, 1898), 428.

⁶⁸ Cf. Talbert (n. 17), 183–8.

⁶⁹ Plut. *Apophthegmata Laconica* 240f. (Gyrtias 1).

mocked by the other Olympians for meddling with martial mêlées where she has no place, in Sparta appeared armed and ready for battle.⁷⁰

V

We need not doubt that there remained room for plenty of laughter and mirth in a Spartiate's life, provided we understand it in its proper context. Ephraim David has documented in detail how much the Spartan sense of humour tended towards the spirit of vaunting, the laughter of triumph, and mockery, not towards good humour as we would understand it, or relief for the common hardships of life by a shared levity.⁷¹ The price was paid, in other words, by those who were *laughed at* – including the Spartiates themselves, at times.⁷² To 'tremblers', tellingly, laughter was expressly forbidden, along with any expression of joy or gladness,⁷³ and helots had better refrain from it anywhere near their masters lest it be taken as a sign of haughtiness and attract the attention of the secret police.⁷⁴

It makes for sombre musings to consider what brought particular honour to a Spartan: as a boy, to be a whip-bearer and an expert punisher of his peers, or perhaps to distinguish himself by the floggings he could endure;⁷⁵ as a teenager on the cusp of manhood, to prove himself before the sworn community of the Spartan peers (*homoioi*) in the part of an especially crafty and ruthless hunter of helots;⁷⁶ as a grown man in the pride of his strength and power, to raise himself above mere mortals

⁷⁰ Cf. *Il.* 5.311–430; Plut. *Instituta Laconica* 28, *Apophthegmata Laconica* 232d (Charillus 5); Paus. 3.15.10, 3.17.5; F. Graf, 'Women, War, and Warlike Divinities', *ZPE* 55 (1984), 245, 248–9.

⁷¹ E. David, 'Laughter in Spartan Society', in A. Powell (ed.), *Classical Sparta. Techniques Behind Her Success* (London, 1989), esp. 4–5; cf. Lendon (n. 18), 112. Cf. also T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, 1994), 1.6.39, 42 (pp. 31–2).

⁷² Plut. *Lyc.* 12.4, 14.3.

⁷³ Xen. *Lac.* 9.4.

⁷⁴ Plut. *Lyc.* 28.3. The subject of the *krypteia* has long been an object of particular fascination; unfortunately no fruitful discussion of its complexities, or those of the debate around it, is possible within the already strained confines of this article.

⁷⁵ Xen. *Lac.* 2.2; cf. Plut. *Lyc.* 17.2–3, Lendon (n. 18), 119 and 121, and Powell (n. 20), 236. The less sanguinary provenance of the rite, which had something to do with dexterously pilfering bits of cheese, looks no less melancholy if we take it as a reminder that the Spartan boys were not only raised on cunning and thieving, but on hunger as well (cf. Xen. *Lac.* 2.6–9).

⁷⁶ Plut. *Lyc.* 28.2; cf. L. Thommen, *Sparta. Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte einer griechischen Polis*, second edition (Stuttgart, 2017), 104 (*verschworene Gemeinschaft*) and 114 (*eingeschworen*), with notes, in the German, of conspiratorial doings (*Verschwörung*).

with a glorious death in the line. The reverse side of the matter is hardly more reassuring: for where honour reigns supreme, so must shame, and lapses need not even involve individual demerit or guilt (that could be forgiven or atoned for), but merely failure in a situation that might well have been more unfortunate than blameworthy.

In the most unadulterated Spartan perspective, a warrior's honour did not ultimately depend on how well he acquitted himself as an individual, or even how bravely he fought in the line, and against what formidable odds. The question whether a daunting, or even desperate, military situation could have possibly been turned around was secondary, the decisive formula simpler: *victory or death*.⁷⁷ Hence the Spartans at Sphacteria, though badly outnumbered, trapped, and ground down by a manner of warfare for which they were neither trained nor equipped, could attempt to deflect the disgrace of defeat only by reference to the unmanly 'spindles' that their opponents had been firing at them from a distance, not by arguing that they had fought as well as humanly possible under the circumstances.⁷⁸ Nor could they make explicit that their predicament had been caused by what Powell calls 'a clear-cut blunder by their commanders', and one that had, to boot, been specifically motivated by the authorities' fears of helot revolt.⁷⁹

Thus might degradations stick irrevocably even to the personally faultless, those who might have fallen sick or missed a battle only because they were following orders, or who might have got caught in some other way on the wrong side of the fortunes of war. Perhaps no case better exemplifies the vagaries of honour at Sparta than that of Aristodemus and Eurytos, who, both incapacitated by ophthalmia, were given permission by their commander, Leonidas, to leave the camp on the eve of battle. When the Persians attacked, Eurytos bethought himself to rush uselessly into battle and was promptly slain. Aristodemus, left behind to face the most unfavourable comparisons with the other's supposedly heroic example, returned to Sparta alone and was so cruelly shunned and shamed that he in effect committed suicide by his crazed fighting at Plataea – whereupon, despite his signal bravery, he was denied any honours even in death, as having wished to die and therefore fighting recklessly and with insufficient regard for his assigned post. A third survivor, who had been sent away with an official

⁷⁷ Cf. Hdt. 7.104.5, Plut. *Instituta Laconica* 4.

⁷⁸ Thuc. 4.40.2.

⁷⁹ Powell (n. 3), 11.308–9.

dispatch, likewise found himself so harried upon his return that he hanged himself on the spot.⁸⁰

Not that the vile mortifications visited upon supposed ‘tremblers’ would have been imposed often in a community that could ill afford to lose many men that way⁸¹ – and that left little room for the pusillanimous by any reasonable standard. The ritual shaming required neither personal guilt nor frequency of application: for it was imposed not so much to castigate real offenders as to fire the imaginations of onlookers with a vivid reminder that no fate could be worse than that of being branded a coward, or an honourless fellow more generally, in the eyes of one’s peers.⁸² Whether a Spartan had in fact committed a craven act or not was quite secondary to the wider purpose of keeping the horror alive. In the absence of any real quailing before the enemy, it was evidently deemed better to punish a few victims of circumstances than to let the harrowing prospect of demotion recede from the minds of the Spartans.

The odds of being singled out must have been generally low, then, for citizens in good standing; but the reverse side of the coin was that even the most faultless behaviour could not keep anyone reliably safe. It is in this sense, albeit on a much more diminutive scale, that Sparta may perhaps be compared, very loosely, with certain notorious modern regimes where arrests have also been made to fall not only on the guilty, and sometimes not even predominantly on them, but on anyone expedient for filling a quota. What is more, tremblers did not suffer alone but had to endure the added agony of witnessing their intimates being implicated in their disgrace.⁸³ Not that such Spartan notions are best understood as anticipating the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century; the latter were retrograde, in key respects at least, not the former forward-looking.⁸⁴ Still, the association is dark and suggestive enough. From whatever angle we may prefer to

⁸⁰ Hdt. 7.229–32, 9.71.2–4. Powell interprets the unfortunates’ treatment (‘so harsh as to be suspicious’) as a political contrivance to ensure that no rival accounts of what happened at the Thermopylae could get back to Sparta (Powell [n. 3], 1.24).

⁸¹ Thus Agesilaus’ pronouncement, after the disastrous battle of Leuctra, that the law must stand but be allowed to sleep for a day (Plut. *Ages.* 30.4), though by then Sparta’s perennial demographic challenges had gone from being serious to being catastrophic. (See the estimates provided by Cartledge [n. 10], 264: from perhaps 8,000 Spartiates in 480 BC to around 5,000 in 479, from 3,500 in 418 to 2,500 in 394, and finally down to no more than 1,500 by 371.)

⁸² Cf. also Lendon (n. 18), 111.

⁸³ Pl. *Lyc.* 18.4, *Ages.* 30.3; Xen. *Lac.* 9.4.

⁸⁴ As against Powell (n. 20), 256; (n. 3), 1.27, 11.310; (n. 5), 231.

approach the Spartan ‘anti-ideal’,⁸⁵ the black hole of ignominy, it cannot be wished away in a society as rigidly honour-bound and as premised on prowess and predation as the Spartan.⁸⁶

VI

Despite everything, the Spartiates may have often been contented with their lot. Their many trials and tribulations must be balanced against the considerable compensations of recognized service to their country, formidable bonds with their companions, and the satisfaction of excelling at something they considered the most valuable accomplishment of all, being their age’s best warriors in the phalanx.⁸⁷

As impressive as some of the Spartans’ achievements may have been, however, we need to keep in mind that theirs was a society that did not aim at individual excellence but at collective might only, to which it readily sacrificed even its guardians with an easy conscience. To put it bluntly, the individual Spartan was not only expendable whatever his place in the hierarchy, he could be also deceived freely whenever it served the presumptive interests of the state.

The mendacious and duplicitous side to the Spartan character – the often ‘chilling dishonesty’ that is described by all our most important contemporary sources for Sparta⁸⁸ – does not, of course, by itself settle anything. Since the Athenian perspective invariably predominates in our extant materials, we can hardly trust antagonists, especially during a bitter and protracted war, to paint an unbiased portrait of their rivals

⁸⁵ Hence David (n. 61), 33, cf. Xen. *Lac.* 9.6.

⁸⁶ Thorstein Veblen’s stark reflections on the predatory life could hardly be more apposite than when it comes to how Spartan society habituated those operating under its bellicose frame of mind to the infliction of injury by force or fraud as a matter of course, in a mental landscape where worthy employments positively *required* able-bodied men to reap where they had not strewn, as Veblen put it; where ‘honourable’ ultimately connoted nothing else than the assertion of superior prowess, and thus an honorific action little more than a successful act of aggression; where it was therefore a man’s accredited purpose in life to kill, destroy, and subjugate others; where, in sum, ‘the high office of slaughter’, as an expression of the slayer’s prowess and preponderance, cast its specious glamour over every bloody action (T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. Martha Banta [Oxford, 2009] 11, 15–18). Hence also Schopenhauer’s diatribe against the archaic logic of honour in chapter 4 of his *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit*, ed. Franco Volpi (Stuttgart, 2007), 95–127, and Hobbes (n. 71), 1.10.48, p. 54.

⁸⁷ Cf. Ducat (n. 2), 337–8. Powell speaks of the ‘moral pleasure’ of the Spartans in their sense of recognized superiority (Powell [n. 3], 1.22; cf. [n. 20], 100), not to be mistaken for ‘moral courage’, in which Powell takes the Spartans to have been conspicuously deficient (Powell [n. 3], 11.304).

⁸⁸ Cf. Powell (n. 3), 11.310 and Epps (n. 14), 21 (cf. esp. nn. 50–4).

and enemies.⁸⁹ Such cautionary considerations notwithstanding, the Spartans themselves avowed their appreciation for the ruses and wiles of war by sacrificing an ox when they had won a victory by craftiness and cunning, as against a rooster when they had done so by force of arms, and their readiness to condone duplicity in military matters would have easily spilled over into other areas in a society so preoccupied with war.⁹⁰ Lysander has been called a ‘rogue Spartan’, and his chilling boast about fooling children with dice, men with oaths, may be a more extreme version of ‘piecing out the lion’s skin with that of the fox’ than many Spartans would perhaps have condoned,⁹¹ yet they seem to have taken more pride than offence at their reputation for being ‘lions at home, foxes abroad’.⁹² The famous legend of the boy and his concealed vulpine catch may be read most straightforwardly as a story about strength of character, even unto death (or perhaps about the intolerable pangs of hunger);⁹³ but it can also be understood, and perhaps ought to be, as a glamorization of keeping up deceptive appearances at any cost.⁹⁴

If we are determined enough to obtain a single narrow objective at any price, be it prowess at war or anything else, even the most remote

⁸⁹ For a nuanced treatment of this complex issue, see A. S. Bradford, ‘The Duplicitous Spartan’, in A. Powell and S. Hodkinson (eds.), *The Shadow of Sparta* (London, 1994), esp. pp. 70, 77. Valid as concerns about the tendentiousness of our sources may be when it comes to areas of invidious comparison, they seem markedly less pertinent to me where such comparisons are not at issue. It is not enough to say that the Spartans were regularly cast as the dramatic foils of the Athenians; one would need to offer some evidence that the Spartans would have objected to such characterizations, and that they would not rather have relished their assigned role of being the Athenians’ opposites. In the area with which Ellen Millender’s argument is most specifically associated, Spartan women (‘Athenian Ideology and the Empowered Spartan Woman’, in S. Hodkinson and A. Powell [eds.], *Sparta. New Perspectives* [Swansea, 1999], 355–91), the case rests on firmer ground; but even there, I see much more at work than Athenian spin, as I show in my ‘Winding Ways’ (n. 2).

⁹⁰ On the rooster and the ox, see Plut. *Instituta Laconica* 25 and *Apophthegmata Laconica* 218f. (Archidemus 5, trans. Talbert [n. 17], 156): ‘It would be better if our intelligence were beating them rather than our strength.’ For the spill-over effect, see Powell (n. 1), 178.

⁹¹ Plut. *Apophthegmata Laconica* 229b (Lysander 2–4, trans. F. C. Babbitt, *Plutarch’s Moralia*, vol. 3 [London, 1961], 373, with interesting cross-references). For ‘rogue Spartan’, see Parker (n. 32), 161.

⁹² Plut. *Vit. Comp. Lys. et Sull.* 3.1. Cf. Powell (n. 3), 1.9: ‘Efficient lying may not have been seen by Spartans as negative; it was apparently something they prided themselves upon.’ Indeed, according to Powell, they were ‘not even averse to being lied to in what they considered a good cause’ (Powell [n. 3], 1.19 [my emphasis], cf. 1.8 on Xen. *Hell.* 1.6.36–7, 4.3.13–14).

⁹³ Plut. *Lyc.* 18.1. The question of how hungry one would have to be to crave such fare is raised by Kagan (n. 7), part 3, but quite apart from the fact that the shame of detection was always the main thing, fox meat really does appear to have been a delicacy in the ancient world (Galen, *De alimentorum facultatibus* 3.1.665 and Oribasius, *Collections* 2.68.11).

⁹⁴ Powell (n. 1), 179.

possibilities may well come within our reach. Yet that is not the question we should be asking ourselves, but rather whether the prize is worth having at such an inordinate human cost. Much as the Spartan crucible has been admired from afar, there are excellent reasons for why it has not been seriously imitated.⁹⁵

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⁹⁵ Xen. *Lac.* 10.8.