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### Review of "The Roman guide to save management: A treatise by Nobleman Marcus Sidonius Falx"

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Toner, J. (2014). *The Roman guide to slave management: A treatise by Nobleman Marcus Sidonius Falx*. New York, NY: Overlook Press.

Jerry Toner's short book, *The Roman Guide to Slave Management: A Treatise by Nobleman Marcus Sidonius Falx* (2014, Overlook Press, 216 pp., ISBN 978-1-4683-1172-3) takes a tongue-in-cheek approach in its illustration of the life of a fictitious nobleman and slave owner. Toner, a University of Cambridge Classicist, received endorsement for the book cover and a foreword by no less than Mary Beard, the pre-eminent British Classicist and public face of ancient history. In her foreword, Beard writes in a style mimicking Toner's own dry wit: "I have never come across Marcus Sidonius Falx before, but I know his type" (p. vii). So it is with great anticipation that historians and economists might approach Toner's work.

Toner's book gives us a faux-treatise, or "how-to" manual on how to deal with slaves from the standpoint of a wealthy slave owner living in the Roman world. In this format, the work deliberately and playfully mimics the smug advice treatises of real ancient writers from as far back as Hesiod (*Works and Days*) to Columella (*On Agriculture*). Its conversational style—the use of "you" is ubiquitous—and helpful imperatives of advice for the aspiring Roman slave owner cover such topics as "How to Buy a Good Slave", "Getting the Best from Your Slaves", "Sex with Slaves", and "Remember Spartacus!"

Each topic is then followed by a short commentary from the modern historian, Toner, which is so filled with contextual details and references to ancient texts that it snaps the reader back to the present. Toner offers short source criticisms and commentary on the real ancient texts that gave rise to Falx's fictional statements. Toner's commentaries also include conscientious discussion of the moral and ethical issues that ancient Romans confronted in their tradition of slavery, and the vast differences with modern attitudes today. For example, in his section on "The Punishment of Slaves," Falx writes with indifference: "There will always be discontented slaves who do not appreciate all that you have done for them and it is better that there is some way for you to recoup the capital that you spent on the ingrate. Otherwise, you lose the entire cost if the slave manages to escape successfully or dies in the attempt or is sentenced to be thrown to the beasts as a punishment by a magistrate in some far-off province where he is captured" (p. 112). Understanding that such an attitude might be shocking and cruel-sounding to young students today, Toner notes in his commentary, "Criminal slaves who were condemned to the mines, to work in the galleys of ships, or to be thrown to the beasts in the amphitheater were seen as completely deserving of their fate. It is tempting to think that the Romans will have felt some pity for poor men and women being thrown to the lions, but there is little evidence for this" (p. 117). These cautionary words will be most helpful for students in introductory university classes in World or Ancient History as reminders of the diversity of past cultural attitudes and their specificity to time and space.



Toner's discussion of cruel treatment of slaves might also inspire contemplation of the prosperous slave markets and mechanisms of supply and demand in the Roman world. While a single slave could be a large investment of capital, the availability and range of prices for slaves varied during the Roman period so that slaves were usually replaceable, even if at a significant cost for the owner. Students of market economies might understand that the punishment or tolerance given to a slave for fleeing or acting out, might depend as much on tradition as on the owner's own economic situation, for the owner had to weigh very carefully the short-term and long-term rewards or costs.

And herein lies the conundrum at the heart of Toner's book: how to manufacture the conceit of being in the heart and mind of an ancient Roman slave owner while at the same time discussing the topic of Roman slavery from the standpoint of a modern Classicist; how to be both fiction and non-fiction at the same time. This conundrum forces a greater-than-possible "willing suspension of disbelief" when the book attempts, with difficulty, to maneuver between ancient attitudes towards mass slavery and modern consciousness of its cruelty. Even as a tongue-in-cheek imagining, the book might fall short for the introductory college student or advanced high school student, as it is replete with lengthy explanations of Roman law and social order and ancient name-dropping. This causes the exclamated musings and rhetorical questions of Falx sometimes to seem forced and anachronistic. He often states what must never have been spoken explicitly. For example, Falx writes, "The man who devotes himself to personal advancement through the acquisition of power and wealth should understand everything that will help him in this endeavor" (p. 3). In the competitive status displays of the late Roman Republic and Empire, visible symbols of power and wealth such as dress and other forms of material culture, were marshaled to draw attention to a person's status. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that any Roman nobleman worth his *dignitas* would verbally acknowledge this as a goal, much less publicly admit these thoughts to his peers. Thus, Toner's efforts, which juxtapose fictional tales of a Roman with evidence-based contextual details of a modern historian, seem forced and break the flow of Falx's "Manual" as ancient treatise.

The book does not purport to address social historical issues in any way, but rather to give an elite-only view of slavery as an institution. Nevertheless, the topic of slavery or interactions between different social groups begs such consideration. Imagining the experience from the slaves' grounding would be an equally worthwhile endeavor, and one that has been attempted successfully in recent books on Roman slavery [e.g. Sarah Joshel's (2010) *Slavery in the Roman World*, as well as in numerous fictional works, such as Howard Fast's (1951) well-known novel *Spartacus*]. However, the book only occasionally considers the experience of the slaves—Toner's commentary refers only briefly to evidence that could shed light on it—and therefore does injustice to the concerns of social history. The same can be said for Falx's response to freedmen. The majority of M. Sedonius Falx's disdain for freedmen seems straight out of Petronius' Trimalchio of the *Satyricon*, and reiterates generic stereotypes of freedmen that are caricatures, rather than



nuanced or based on a nobleman's (or freedman's) lived experience, for which other primary sources exist.

Toner's nobleman M. Sedonius Falx does on occasion discuss the economic reasoning behind his acquisition, treatment, and de-accessioning of slaves. These general statements tend to focus on the idea that the slave is a form of capital, an investment that should in some way show a return. For example, Falx states at the outset: "Slaves are nothing but an expense" (p. 32). Toner follows in his commentary with estimates of the prices of slaves and concludes: "the large retinues of slaves maintained by the rich had little to do with economics and lots to do with conspicuous consumption" (p. 34). In fact, a great deal of research has explored ancient slavery through the lens of (labor) market analysis, from Moses I. Finley's 1970s lectures denying the existence of markets to Peter Temin's (2012) *The Roman Market Economy*. These analyses incorporate a variety of source materials, and might have led to a more nuanced representation by Toner of the considerations of supply and demand that Roman slave owners and managers made on a daily basis.

Thus, as labor history or social history, this book does not stand up, but then again, it does not purport to be either of these. As interesting tongue-in-cheek tale of a Roman nobleman's experience with slaves and their ownership, the book often breaks its own device, incorporating the modern historian's voice and overriding that of Marcus Sidonius Falx. As an introduction to elite Roman attitudes towards slaves and the institution of slavery, the wordiness of the book and dry details *might* keep the interest of the young university student or advanced high school student. But in spite all of these flaws, the context that is formed and ancient sources that are discussed, as well as its brevity, make this a fine alternative to a textbook or research monograph for a book about ancient Roman slavery aimed at the introductory history or economics student.

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