

The Ritual (De)Construction of Masculinity in Mark 6

A Methodological Exploration on the Interface of Gender and Ritual Studies

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Abstract

Both ritual studies and masculinity studies are relative newcomers to the field of New Testament studies. This article endeavours to combine insights from both of these fields and to show how such a combination can be heuristically helpful. In particular, it explores how the respective masculinities of “king” Herod and Jesus are narratively constructed in Mark 6 through the presentation of their behaviour during their participation in rituals, meals to be exact. The two key female characters are also discussed and analysed, in relation to ritual failure. In doing so, new light is shed on this chapter of the Gospel of Mark. In addition, and experimentally, a new matrix for the analysis of the masculinity/religion interface is presented and tested.¹

Key Terms

Mark 6; masculinity; (construction of) masculinities; ritual studies; ritual failure; meals; hosting; Jesus; Herod; Herodias; dance; intersectionality

1 Introduction

Masculinity was constructed variously in and through early Christian texts (and this continues to take place in the reception of such texts).² Recent

¹ The author is grateful to the four (!) external reviewers of *Neotestamentica* who provided extensive reviews as well as to The Rev. Dr Walter Baer, Vienna, for proofreading the manuscript.

² See, e.g., Van Klinken and Smit (2013); Creangă and Smit (2014); Creangă, Van Klinken, and Smit (2015).

research has begun to give the topic due attention. The interface, however, between ritual and masculinity has, in NT studies, not been explored in much depth so far, except, for instance, when it comes to circumcision, which, for rather obvious reasons, is intimately connected to the construction of masculinity and the appertaining discourse.³ This article seeks to close this gap in scholarship, both on ritual and on the construction of masculinity in earliest “Christianity,” by analysing how in Mark 6, particularly in the two meal scenes that occur in that chapter,⁴ the main protagonists’ masculinities are narratively (de)constructed through the telling of their participation in two distinct, yet narratively juxtaposed, table fellowships, which are fairly ritualised affairs as table fellowships commonly are. Thus, further light is shed both on Mark 6 and on the heuristic potential that can be gleaned from a combination of ritual approaches to early Christian texts and gender studies, in particular masculinity studies. For the analysis of the role of ritual in these texts, the usefulness of which has been substantiated elsewhere and is presupposed here,⁵ use will be made in particular of the body of theory dealing with “ritual failure.” The rationale for this is that, as will become clear below, the first case of the narrative construction of masculinity through the telling of a character’s (i.e., Herod’s) participation in a ritual involves a rather spectacular case of ritual failure. Accordingly, the ritual success of the other protagonist (i.e., Jesus) is best appreciated in the light of this failure and as its mirror image. In order to achieve all of this, first a brief overview of key characteristics of the discourse on masculinity in early Christianity and its world will be outlined, followed by a similar sketch of the theory concerned with “ritual failure,” after which Mark 6 will be analysed, with an eye to testing the usefulness of a combination of ritual and gender perspectives for the analysis of an early Christian text.⁶

³ See, e.g., Neutel and Anderson (2014, 228–244). For a study that takes up the notion of sacrifice in relation to masculinity, see Eisenbaum (2004, 671–702).

⁴ See Smit (2009, 29–46; 2010, 198–207), albeit without attention to either masculinity or ritual studies.

⁵ See Smit (2013, 165–195; 2016a, 12–24; 2016b), as well as surveys such as those provided by Lamoreaux (2009, 153–165) and Duran (2009, esp. 1–23).

⁶ A more extensive study of the contents of this article appears in Smit, Peter-Ben. 2017. *Masculinity and the Bible: Survey, Models and Perspectives*. Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation 2(1):1–97.

2 Masculinities in the Graeco-Roman World

Studies of masculinity/-ies in the Graeco-Roman world, including early Christianity, often have as their point of departure an outline of “hegemonic” or “ideal-typical” masculinity, which, even if the exclusive focus on such forms of masculinity might be somewhat narrow, nonetheless enables one to get a good grasp of the themes and topics associated with the notion of masculinity, which, as such, was intricately linked up with *andreia*, which is both a virtue and an aspect of gender. For this reason “feminine” is not always the antonym of masculine in antiquity.⁷ Larson (2004) helpfully summarises the issue:

Masculinity was viewed as an attribute only partially related to an individual’s anatomical sex. Whereas breasts and womb ensured that their possessor would be viewed as essentially feminine, the same was not true for anatomical males. Because masculinity was all but identified with social and political dominance, there was no assumption that all males must be masculine. The masculinity of slaves, for example, was by definition impaired. Personal dignity, bodily integrity, and specific details of one’s appearance were all factors in individual self-assessment and in men’s evaluation of one another’s masculinity. Elite men of the day were constantly concerned with the maintenance of their masculinity, because it both displayed and justified their positions of power. Unlike noble birth, which was immutable, masculinity was a matter of perception. While elites always represented their masculinity to outsiders as innate, among insiders it was implicitly recognized that masculinity was a performance requiring constant practice and vigilance. (p. 86)

⁷ In the course of this contribution, I will attempt to avoid using “feminine” as the antonym of “masculine.” A more precise antonym would be *ἀνανδρεία*. In fact, one could imagine a quadrant of masculinities, such as the following of my own invention:

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Strong body Strong character | Strong body Weak character |
| Weak body Strong character | Weak body Weak character |

The upper left hand corner could be termed “typical masculinity,” the upper right hand corner “apparent masculinity,” the lower left hand corner “surprising masculinity,” the lower right hand corner “unmasculinity.”

What made a person masculine was determined by a number of factors. Various overviews exist, yet the one provided by Mayordomo-Marín (2006, 2) is particularly helpful. He mentions the following seven aspects of ideal-typical (“hegemonic”) masculinity:

- (1) The conventional Graeco-Roman view of gender, sex, and body was that in reality only a “monosexual” body existed that could manifest itself as (more) masculine or (more) feminine through genitals that had either grown outwardly or inwardly.
- (2) Masculinity was not necessarily a fact determined by the body with which one was born, but needed to be proved constantly in the public arena, through one’s appearance, behaviour, and performance. Everyone (m/f) could constantly become more or less masculine.
- (3) Masculinity was very closely bound up with the notions of activity and dominance (ibid.):

Being a man in antiquity was very closely linked to the role of being an active agent rather than passive. Be it in politics, in sports, in war, in rhetoric or in the vast field of sexuality, what qualified an individual as a *man* was his active control of the situation. (p. 7)

- (4) Masculinity and being virtuous were closely intertwined, specifically through the cardinal virtue of ἀνδρεία and through the virtues in general (*virtutes*).
- (5) Self-control was an essential part of the aforementioned dominance: “The most active agent would be a man who controls himself with respect to anger and all other forms of passions, especially those associated with sexuality” (ibid., 8).
- (6) This state of affairs also meant that, *sensu stricto*, no one was really born as a man, but that even a boy needed to be educated and trained to be a proper man.
- (7) Finally, masculinity and femininity were both associated with respective social spaces: outside and inside, public and private.

Being masculine in relation to these characteristics was a process of constant negotiation, especially if one occupied a less than elite position in society, which applied to many, if not most, early Christian personalities, certainly prior to the “conversion of Constantine” and its aftermath. To be sure, early Christians could, in this regard, tap into the resources of

(popular) philosophical discourses, such as the Stoic and Cynic ones, that were also concerned with the construction of “subhegemonic” forms of masculinity in relation to the “hegemonic” ideal, thus challenging this ideal in the process (see Wilson 2015, 24–25).

3 Ritual Failure

Ritual failure refers to cases in which a ritual is imperfectly performed,⁸ giving rise to its discussion and (re)negotiation in relation to the ritual community’s developing identity (= “ritual negotiation”).⁹ Here, aspects of the appertaining body of theory are outlined in relation to the analysis of Mark 6. (No full overview will be provided, but the focus will be on what is needed for the actual analysis.)

Rituals may fail due to a number of reasons all of which are related to the “grammar” of the ritual,¹⁰ including expectations with regard to its procedure, the persons and items involved, and the outcome. A broadly received proposal for the classification of ritual failure, or “ritual infelicities,” to use his term, has been introduced by Grimes. The typology

⁸ With Michaels (1999, 23–47, esp. 29–39), rituals are understood to have the following five characteristics: (1) Rituals are always related to change and liminality (*causa transitionis*); (2) A ritual is always intentional; some kind of ritual intention needs to be there and be expressed (*solemnis intentio*); (3) A ritual is characterised by certain formal criteria of action; that is, in order to be a ritual, an action must be stereotypical, formalised, repetitive, public, irrevocable, and often liminal (*actiones formaliter riterorum*); (4) Rituals are always modal in character (*actiones modaliter ritorum*); (5) Rituals are related to change in identity, status, role, or competency (*transition vitae*). This approach, which does not follow earlier “grand unified theories” concerning the study of ritual, can be justified by referring to the lack of any one current “grand unified theory” for the exploration of ritual in the NT world and recent calls, such as by Uro (2010, 223–235), for a “piecemeal approach” to early Christian ritual that utilises a combination of approaches and insights regarding ritual. According to Uro (2010):

Theoretical and methodological problems in the study of early Christian ritual can be best addressed by a piecemeal approach in which different aspects of early Christian behavior, as reflected in our sources, are examined in view of the insights and knowledge gained from ritual and cognate studies. (p. 234)

What follows here, can also be found in Smit (2013; 2016a).

⁹ See on this, especially Hüsken and Neubert (2012, 1–17).

¹⁰ On this helpful notion, see the following observations by Michaels (2012, 11): “ritual behaviour is structured and . . . many of these structures can be represented in such a formalised way that general rules surface. The description and analysis of these structures and rules are nothing else than a grammar, the grammar of rituals . . .”

that he offers includes a variety of kinds of failures that are not (mutually) exclusive; also, a ritual can be successful on one level for some and a failure on another level for others (e.g., a fertility ritual that fails to produce fertility, but does contribute to group cohesion).¹¹ According to Grimes, the following cases of ritual failure can be distinguished:¹²

1. Misfire (act purported but void)
 - 1.1. Misinvocation (act disallowed)
 - 1.1.1. Nonplay (lack of accepted conventional procedure)
 - 1.1.2. Misapplication (inappropriate persons or circumstances)
 - 1.2. Misexecution (act vitiated)
 - 1.2.1. Flaw (incorrect, vague, or inexplicit formula)
 - 1.2.2. Hitch (incomplete procedure)
2. Abuse (act professed but hollow)
 - 2.1. Insincerity (lack of requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions)
 - 2.2. Breach (failure to follow through)
 - 2.3. “Gloss” (procedures used to cover up problems)
 - 2.4. “Flop” (failure to produce appropriate mood or atmosphere)
3. “Ineffectuality” (act fails to precipitate anticipated empirical change)
4. “Violation” (act effective but demeaning)
5. “Contagion” (act leaps beyond proper boundaries)
6. “Opacity” (act unrecognisable or unintelligible)
7. “Defeat” (act discredits or invalidates acts of others)
8. “Omission” (act not performed)
9. “Misframe” (genre or act misconstrued)

With respect to the process of analysing ritual failure, it is of importance to note that the evaluation of rituals is an inherent part of the communities performing them. According to Hüsken (2007):

Evaluation is an intersubjective process, executed by groups or individuals. It is based on certain sets of values which might stem from canons which the participants themselves have not created,

¹¹ See the foundational contribution of Grimes (1990, 191–209, 205–207); see also the theoretical considerations offered by Ing (2012, 38–56).

¹² For the typology, see Grimes (1990, 204–205). The ritual theory followed here is indebted to Hüsken (2007, 337–366), for whom Grimes (1990) forms an important background.

but it might equally be based on the expectations, intentions and agenda of individual participants . . . (p. 339)

In other words, the attribution of failure or success to a ritual is not an extraneous scholarly classification, but inherent to the ritual and its performance.¹³ Furthermore, as Hüsken (ibid.) has pointed out, based on the analysis of a collection of studies on ritual failure, cases of rituals going awry contribute much to the discovery of the meaning of a ritual for a community and to the further development of the rituals as such:

[P]articipants and spectators alike learn more about the “correct” performance of a ritual by deviating from, rather than by adhering to the rules. One might even say that solely the definitions and examples of “ritual failure” and “error”—and how they are coped with—prove the existence of decisive norms for ritual actions, even when the former are imagined deviations from imagined norms. . . . “Failed ritual” directs our attention to “what really matters” to the performers and participants and others in one way or another involved in a ritual. (p. 337)

“Ritual negotiation” has been described by Hüsken and Neubert (2012, 1) as the process of “interaction during which differing positions are debated and/or acted out” in relation to a particular ritual and the community performing it, noting that “a central feature of ritual is its embeddedness in negotiation processes, and that life beyond the ritual frame often is negotiated in the field of rituals.” These insights further develop three aspects already brought to the fore by the study of ritual failure (ibid., 1–4):

- the importance of rituals as a focus for the (re)negotiation of the life of a community or group;
- the significance of power relations with regard to the performance and criticism of ritual;
- the importance of (perceived) failure and disagreement for triggering critical thinking and reflection.

It goes without saying that such (re)negotiation of rituals also points to the often masked but fundamental instability and fluidity of rituals and their performance. Initial explorations in the field of ritual negotiation have led to the identification of three main themes associated with it:

¹³ See Hüsken (2007, 338–341), following Grimes’s “Response.”

- Questions of participation, both in the ritual as well as in processes of negotiation regarding it often are of central importance.
- Questions relating to the “subversion of ritual prescriptions, ritual roles, and the power relations surrounding the ritual performances” (ibid., 4) often seem to be the trigger of processes of ritual negotiation.
- Questions concerning the context of a ritual, specifically the web of social (power) relations within which it has a place and the kind of differences it negotiates move to the foreground when processes of ritual negotiation are taken into account.

4 Ritually (De)Constructing Masculinity at the Table in Mark 6

4.1 Meals in Mark 6

Mark 6 has often—if not in scholarly literature then at least in many editions of translations of the NT—been subdivided into a section dealing with Jesus’s rejection and relative powerlessness in his πατρις (6:1–6), the sending out of the Twelve (6:7–13), the intermittent narration of the death of John the Baptist (6:14–29), and the subsequent return of the Twelve (6:30–32), the miraculous feeding (6:33–44), Jesus’s walking on the water (6:45–52), and subsequent success as a healer in Gennesareth (6:53–55), thus focusing on the narrative progression of the Gospel of Mark in relation to the development of Jesus’s mission. Recently, other aspects of this section of Mark have begun to command attention, particularly the contrast between the two meals: Herod’s birthday banquet and Jesus’s feast in the wilderness.¹⁴ This juxtaposition is artful and likely an intentional aspect of the literary architecture of the Gospel of Mark. Utilising his typical “sandwiching” technique of narrating a story in between two parts of another story, Mark has interrupted the chronological narration of events by inserting a flashback into his account of the sending out of the Twelve, their exploits and return (6:7–13 and 30–32, resp.). He achieves at least two things by doing so: firstly, he heightens the suspense of the narrative by having the disciples sent out and then delay the account of their mission and its success or failure (note that Jesus himself failed in

¹⁴ In the following, references have been kept to a minimum; see for tradition- and form-critical considerations, as well as discussions of the appertaining literature, to which the following is also indebted: Smit (2008, 53–82; 2009, 29–46), and further Ebner (2004). On the dynamics of public meals and/or dispensation of food, see, e.g., Stavrianopoulou (2009, 159–184) and Standhartinger (2013, 60–81; 2015, 47–63).

6:1–6; there is a real risk of failure, also for the disciples); and secondly, Mark can now narrate the story of Jesus’s banquet in the wilderness in juxtaposition to Herod’s birthday banquet, even if the two do not belong next to each other from a chronological perspective. Given this set-up, it is reasonable to explore the juxtaposition of these two meals further—in this article especially as it concerns masculinity performance and, therefore, credibility as leaders (or even “kings”) on the part of the two hosts: Herod and Jesus. In doing so, insights from the field of ritual failure and the study of masculinities will be combined. Particular attention will be given to the issues identified above as characteristic of the Graeco-Roman discourse on masculinity, particularly the question of control. Such control was exercised at meals through ordering people and providing foodstuff; it thus had a material side as well. In sum, constructions of masculinity were intersectional in character and had multiple aspects, including social (dominance over others), psychological (self-control), economic (ability to provide), and religio-ethnic (pagan/Jewish divide) aspects.

4.2 *Herod’s failing as host and man*

When approaching the narrative of Herod’s birthday banquet (see v. 21: Ἡρώδης τοῖς γενεσίοις αὐτοῦ δεῖπνον ἐποίησεν),¹⁵ attention for the setting of the scene is important, because the way the scene is set indicates that the stakes are very high indeed. This begins with the identification of Herod, a tetrarch, as “king” (ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἡρώδης, v. 14), which points to public leadership and its credibility. A next aspect of the setting of the scene is the outline of Herod’s and Herodias’s different attitudes vis-à-vis John the Baptist (vv. 17–20) and the ensuing question: Will Herod be able to negotiate this struggle between interests and convictions and, thus, prove to be a worthy “king”? The suspense is intensified accordingly. The stakes of this struggle between Herod and Herodias are heightened by the mise-en-scène: Herod’s birthday banquet, which he offers “τοῖς μεγιστᾶσιν αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῖς χιλιάρχοις καὶ τοῖς πρώτοις τῆς Γαλιλαίας” (v. 21). The occasion is not only public but also male in character; in fact, it is very likely that this is an all-male party. Apart from the background tension, all seems to bode well for a birthday celebration that stages the power relations in Galilee, with Herod at the top of this (provincial) hierarchy, in control, in a position to put on a lavish banquet for his associates and

¹⁵ The fact of this celebration is a possible indication of pagan ways; see Smit (2009, 29–46).

subjects, and, therefore, a credible masculine king. Clearly, all of this disintegrates as soon as Herodias's daughter enters and dances for the assembled dinner party. At this point the ritual of the meal as it should have unfolded breaks down. Perspectives from the study of ritual failure can elucidate the dynamics.

I will begin with the notion of “misapplication” (Grimes's type 1.1.2.). The thought that a ritual is performed by inappropriate persons can be used to unpack what happens through the dance of Herodias's daughter. Public dances as entertainment during a(n all-male) dinner party were not deemed suitable to be performed by a person of high status, let alone a princess. Even if the dance was innocent, its perception by the male spectatorship would be different (see v. 22: ἤρρεσεν τῷ Ἡρώδῃ καὶ τοῖς συνανακειμένοις). In fact, Herod's reaction in vv. 22–23 echoes the words of the intoxicated king Ahashveros vis-à-vis Esther in Esth 5:3, 6; 7:2. Here, the order of the banquet, as such, is disturbed already by the princess's dance and by Herod's condoning of it, as he is pleased by it and even makes a grand public promise, an oath (see v. 26: ὄρκος), which in itself has a ritual character and goes beyond the self-control that a credible king and host should possess. The oath can be read as a different kind of ritual failure, that of “insincerity” (Grimes's type 2.1., indicating “lack of requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions”). Herod, indeed, lacks self-control and possesses too much lust, which prevents him from performing the banquet in line with the expectations attached to it by the cultural script according to which it ought to function (this could be seen as a “breach,” Grimes's type 2.2., indicating failure to follow through). How fatal this is becomes clear from the next scene of this narrative: the complete outmanoeuvring of Herod by Herodias (vv. 24–26), which, in and of itself, not only makes Herod even less credible as a masculine leader in control of himself and his court and kingdom, but also has a ritual background: Herod's oath binds him to fulfil his promise to Herodias's daughter (v. 26). This can be seen as a case of “defeat” (Grimes's type 7: one ritual is “defeated” by another more powerful one). Herod's all too spontaneous oath, itself ritual in nature, trumps the ritual of the meal and its demands, in particular his performance as a host and king. He has to give in and do as he is made to by his wife and stepdaughter and his court (v. 26). Instead of being in control of them, he is now being controlled by them.¹⁶ What

¹⁶ It might, theoretically speaking, be possible to laud Herod for his behaviour. Controlling his feelings, he keeps his promise. This, however, would mean ignoring the

happens next—the rather emphatic presentation of John’s head on a platter, literally in line with the initial request (vv. 25, 28)—can well be understood as an example of “violation” (Grimes’s type 4: “act effective but demeaning”): food is being served at this banquet, but it is “demeaning” in nature. The banquet also fails ritually in this aspect: Herod is unable to serve his guests the kind of meal that he should have; in fact, he only serves them death and chaos, the disintegration of himself as a man and a king. He does not live up to general euergetical expectations concerning the lavish, or at least tasteful, character of banquets. With that the meal is not just a flop generally speaking, but also technically speaking, given that “flop” is Grimes’s type 2.4. of ritual failure, referring to a “failure to produce appropriate mood or atmosphere.” This, indeed, is the case in Herod’s palace: rather than harmonious order and peace, violence and chaos are the outcome. John’s literal loss of his head was caused by Herod’s figurative loss of his head to his wife’s daughter and his subsequent less-than-willing (v. 26) surrender of all power and control to his wife and her daughter and his subjects, becoming little more than a puppet in their hands, despite his “royal” and well-intentioned beginning in this narrative. He has lost the contest. The suspense is dissolved in Herodias’s favour.

When relating this failed ritual of Herod’s birthday banquet to the above outline of key characteristics of the Graeco-Roman discourse on masculinity, it becomes clear that in Mark 6:14–29 masculinity is a question of performance that does not depend on formal status or bodily attributes (Mayordomo’s characteristics 1 and 2). Given that his performance hinges to a very substantial extent on self-control and control over others, Herod’s failure to follow through with the ritual of the banquet due to his loss of self-control is precisely what initiates his downfall as a credible and masculine ruler. Even in the “male” public space of the banquet hall, he is “taken over,” not only by the other men present there, but also by those “unmasculine” persons who ought to have no part to play there, the women of his court. This reveals Herod’s masculinity to be little more than a fiction. Herod’s ritual and performance failures lead to his emasculation.

extent to which his lack of control over his feelings has led him to surrender control over his own actions and obligations to others.

4.3 *Jesus as masculine host in the wilderness*

As soon as Mark's "camera" shifts away from Herod—leaving him, quite miserably, in his palace—and moves to the return of Jesus's disciples, noting in passing the burial of John by his own disciples (v. 29), a different kind of narrative suspense begins.¹⁷ The suspense now has to do with Jesus's authority and that of his followers. After the substantial blow to Jesus's authority (6:1–6), the issue has been left unresolved with the sending out of the Twelve into the unknown with an equally uncertain measure of success.¹⁸

While the return of the Twelve is narrated succinctly and with the implication of the success of the disciples (vv. 30–32), a new meal scene starts in v. 33. Here, also, first a certain setting of the scene takes place: the place where Jesus and his disciples are is deserted (v. 32: εἰς ἔρημον τόπον); people have come "from all the towns" (v. 33: ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν πόλεων; the expression reinforces that Jesus is not in the vicinity of any substantial civilisation); a lot of people are there (v. 33 and v. 34: πολὺν ὄχλον). While Herod is introduced as king and one celebrating his birthday, Jesus is introduced with rich biblical allusions that are reminiscent of kingship language and language about the deity in the Scriptures of Israel: ἐσπλαγγνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτούς, ὅτι ἦσαν ὡς πρόβατα μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα (v. 34; see Num 27:17; Jdt 11:19; 2 Chr 18:16, cf. Ezek 34:5, 8; Zech 10:2). In fact, the entire narrative can be seen to echo topics and themes from the manna narratives (Exod 16:1–36; Num 11:1–9), in which lack of food, a wilderness, the people of Israel challenging Moses and YHWH, and a superabundant provision of food all play a role as well, even if these echoes are hard to pin down. The teaching that Jesus gives and his attitude toward the many people assembled around him also places him in the lineage of Israel's leaders of the past (v. 34).

¹⁷ The result is what can be regarded as a chiasmic structure, consisting of the following parts: A: Jesus's failure in Nazareth; B: Jesus's sending out of the Twelve; C: Herod's Banquet; B': the return of the disciples; A': Jesus's success in Nazareth, which has as its key topic the advance of Jesus's mission and ministry. Within this larger context, however, the juxtaposition of the meals plays its own and distinctive role, given that it not just shows how successful and potent Jesus is, but also how he relates to other kinds of authority and what their real substance is.

¹⁸ Although Jesus's giving of authority (ἐξουσία) to his disciples in v. 7 is an indication of Jesus's being in the position of doing so, the preceding verses may well give rise to the question as to whether this authority actually amounts to anything at all.

Given all of this, expectations are also high concerning Jesus. The question is: will he succeed where Herod failed? The odds are against him; there seems to be a general lack of planning and resources, given the spontaneous character of the gathering and its outback location. Instead of a dancing princess, the late hour of the day (ἤδη ὥρας πολλῆς γενομένης, v. 35) is the catalyst in this part of the narrative that sets the performance of the meal or banquet ritual into motion. Jesus is prompted by his disciples, who present the problem (ἔρημός ἐστιν ὁ τόπος καὶ ἤδη ὥρα πολλή, v. 35), and a proposal to send away the people, so that they can buy food somewhere (v. 36). Giving in to this request would have meant Jesus's failure to perform according to the role that he had assumed just verses prior to this, partially through Mark's description of his sentiments, his attitude vis-à-vis the people, and his ensuing actions (i.e., his teaching). In fact, it would have amounted to a "breach" (Grimes's type 2.2., indicating a failure to follow through) in the performance of the script of leadership, given that Jesus would have failed to provide for the people assembled around him. What seems to have led to a community with Jesus as its shepherd would turn out to be less than that: a kind of failure that could be understood with the help of Grimes's category 3: "ineffectuality" (failure to precipitate the anticipated empirical change). The proposal pitched to Jesus by his disciples poses just as much a risk to him, his leadership and his credibility as a masculine figure, as the dance of Herodias's daughter did to Herod. In his response, Jesus challenges his disciples, responding to their request (and implied challenge of his leadership, or at least of his ability to provide for those assembled around him) with a challenge of his own: to provide for the people rather than to send them away (v. 37: δότε αὐτοῖς ὑμεῖς φαγεῖν). The disciples are unable to do this, as they indicate with reference to the magnitude of this task (v. 37: ἀπελθόντες ἀγοράσωμεν δηναρίων διακοσίων ἄρτους καὶ δώσομεν αὐτοῖς φαγεῖν). This provides an opening in the narrative for Jesus to take the initiative and regain control. He assumes the role of host actively and sets out to perform accordingly, in a number of steps: he takes inventory (v. 38), an action which only heightens the suspense: five loaves of bread and two fish are not exactly a promising starting-point; he organises the crowd (vv. 39–40) in a manner that Mark describes in language that may well echo divine provision or promises of this in Israel's Scriptures (see the reference to green grass in v. 39 and Ps 23:2);¹⁹ and, finally, he opens

¹⁹ See further Smit (2008, 75–77).

the meal by blessing the food (v. 41), after which he utilises his disciples as table servants, all the while exercising total control. The result is stated in a rather lapidary way in v. 42: “ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν,” a statement that is elaborated upon in vv. 43–44, in two paratactically connected remarks: first that “καὶ ἦσαν κλάσματα δώδεκα κοφίνων πληρώματα καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἰχθύων”; and then that there are not just plenty of leftovers, but that an enormous crowd has been fed—“καὶ ἦσαν οἱ φαγόντες [τοὺς ἄρτους] πεντακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες.” The parataxis here has the effect, as it may well have in the entirety of Mark 6, to move from one surprising or intriguing statement to the next. That specifically men are mentioned has given rise to all sorts of interpretative suggestions. For the purposes of this article, it is of interest to note that the all-male crowd (in Mark’s description!) that is under Jesus’s control (or should we say “spell”?) provides a nice contrast with Herod’s all-male guest list in the previous narrative: the group that “controlled” him by factually holding him to his publicly made oath.

When comparing the performance of Jesus and Herod against the background of the ritual script of a meal and with specific attention to the construction of a host’s masculinity through his performance of this role, presiding, ideally in control of himself, over the gathering and over the supplies needed for the meal to take place, it becomes apparent that Jesus, surprisingly, given his less than promising starting-point (in the wilderness, with hardly any resources or infrastructure, and with his disciples challenging him), succeeds, whereas Herod, just as surprisingly, fails, despite the rather well-endowed position in which he finds himself, in terms of status, resources, and (apparent) control at the start of the narrative. Owing to the fact that Jesus (1) overcomes the disciples’ challenge, but Herod succumbs to the (unintentional) challenge of his stepdaughter’s dance; (2) inventorises and organises the foodstuff and people at his disposal, but Herod, at this stage, is already bound by his own oath and under the control of his wife and his male “subjects”; (3) presides over the meal proper, serving an abundance of bread and fish through his disciples, but Herod is only able to serve the head of John the Baptist and this rather unwillingly; and (4) ends up with a well-fed, well-organised, large and quite governable crowd, with his disciples following his orders, while Herod finds his staff following Herodias’s orders rather than his own, Jesus emerges as an effective, successful and credibly masculine

leader. He is a true *euergetes*²⁰ who is associated with the deity of Israel and earlier leaders of Israel, given the intertextual connections between this narrative and earlier texts (e.g., the manna narratives, Ps 23). Jesus, in other words, travels a trajectory that is the inverse of Herod's with a positive outcome for his narrative characterisation as a man. The comparative tactic at work here is reminiscent of Philo's and others' employment of contrasting accounts involving meals and masculinity.²¹ Also like Philo's contrast between the pagan (Greek and Roman) banquets and the meals of the Therapeutae, the narrative construction of Jesus's and Herod's masculinity through their table manners, as it were, has repercussions for the kinds of order that they represent: meals are always more than just meals; they are also microcosmic representations of social order. Given his association with not just a potentially pagan birthday, but also the Roman military (see the reference to *χιλίαρχοι* in v. 21), his unwitting imitation of King Ahashveros when interacting with his stepdaughter, and his general association with Roman colonial rule as a "king" (in Mark's terminology; in reality a tetrarch), Herod may well serve as a representative of Roman colonial rule here and the appertaining social order. If so, Roman rule and order are given a less than complimentary characterisation in this narrative. In stark contrast, Jesus's establishment of his virtuous and masculine rule and his creation of a meal fellowship may well be representative of the (utopian) rule of God. Herod's authority, which consists of a power over death and life, is thus trumped by a power to make alive and sustain life.²² Naturally, this suits the overall Markan agenda of a positive portrayal of the representatives of God's rule and a negative portrayal of those representing competing kinds of rule.

4.4 *Femininity and ritual failure?*

4.4.1 The two female characters in Mark 6 and their ritual actions

The vantage point of ritual studies, particularly ritual failure, can also be used to shed light on the characterisation of the two female characters in Mark 6, namely Herodias and her unnamed daughter. Regarding the use of the term "femininity" in the above heading, this study so far has shown

²⁰ See on the interrelationship between public feedings and euergetism, e.g., Standhartinger (2013, 60–81).

²¹ Cf. Philo, *De vita contemplativa* 40–90. For this trope in general see, e.g., MacDonald (2008, 166–195) and the examples provided there.

²² See from an anthropological perspective also Strecker (2007, 133–153).

that femininity is not a characteristic of female persons only. Therefore, it is solely for practical purposes that it has been taken as a starting-point. The ritual failure involving the two women concerns two acts in particular, both of which might well be understood as ritual in nature, or as part of a ritual: the dance of the daughter of Herodias and the preparation of food. In both cases something goes awry and this can be explored through the lens of ritual failure.

4.4.2 The dance

In Mark 6 the daughter of Herodias dances. In terms of her characterisation, it is significant that she is nameless: her social position is more important than she as a person, it seems. Her dance fails as part of the ritual of dining in that it upsets the flow of the banquet. This does not imply that the dance itself was inappropriate, for instance, by being particularly erotic. Recent scholarship has rightly cured most exegesis of this assumption, which is simply not warranted by the text.²³ The text only states that the girl, later called Salome, dances—not how she dances. Yet, in two ways the ritual can be perceived as a failure. To begin with, it is performed by an inappropriate person (even if the person in question dances very appropriately): princesses do not dance at royal banquets; dancing is work for a different “class” of people (cf. Grimes’s category of misapplication, 1.1.2.). As was already noted, the effect of this is that negative light is shed on the Herodian court and, possibly, on the girl in question, notwithstanding the possibility of a perfectly chaste dance. The other way in which the dance fails has to do with its function in the overarching ritual that the banquet as a whole constitutes: it is much more than “just” entertainment; its effects upset the order of the entire banquet. This has to do primarily with the spectators as participants in the ritual. In Mark 6 their reaction to the dance receives much more attention than the

²³ Feminist scholarship, especially, has rightly cautioned against eroticising the dance, given that (1) the text is silent about its character and (2) that such an interpretation may well represent a male gaze on a female object rather than to represent female subjectivity (in this case: “the princess”). Such an erotic evaluation is not intended here: the focus is on the text’s portrayal of the way in which the men involved react to the dance; this would represent a male view of men’s behaviour. For a representative example of feminist criticism of this pericope, see Anderson (1992, 103–134). Anderson rightly suggests that John (in my view: like Herod) is feminised. I am less convinced that Jesus, as a source of nutrition, is feminised as well (p. 133). For an overview of the history of interpretation of the “dancing daughter,” see, e.g., Baert (2014, 5–29); see also the literature referred to in Baert (2014).

dance itself. In fact, Herod's reaction to it is the pivot of the entire narrative. When utilising Grimes's typology, "contagion," describing an act that leaps beyond proper boundaries (type 5), may cover the "failed" effect of the dance, caused by the spectators, who are also to be considered participants in the ritual, its reception and evaluation. To the extent that the dance *qua* ritual disturbs the overarching ritual of the banquet, which now produces disorder rather than order (as a Graeco-Roman banquet ought to), it fails. For the key performer of the ritual, the unnamed princess, this means that she gains much more influence and agency in the subsequent course of events than one would expect. Being gazed at by Herod and his male banqueting buddies, she—voluntarily or involuntarily—captures the gaze and begins to control the scene. Gaining influence over others and agency in the unfolding of events, she certainly becomes more "masculine" in the process. The reverse is true for Herod and his courtiers, as was already discussed. Their loss of agency, due to loss of self-control, likely for erotic reasons, also spells their loss of masculine status.

4.4.3 The preparation and serving of food

At meals, certainly at banquets, food preparation and the serving of prepared foodstuffs must be regarded as part of the ritual performance of the meal as a whole. This can be argued by pointing to fixed, time-hallowed ways of doing things which are charged with significance²⁴ and which certainly are not always the most practical way of proceeding, as well as by observing the distributions of roles, and the gendered nature of the whole. In fact, the preparation of food is a task associated with the "feminine realm," frequently today, but certainly in the Graeco-Roman world. This realm also includes people with a less than hegemonic masculinity identity, such as slaves or servants. In this way, the preparation and serving of food are tasks full of significance and expressive of relationships. At the same time, they are rather precarious: food can be poisoned and receiving and consuming food prepared by others always involves vulnerability. For these reasons—others can easily be adduced, but these are the main ones—the preparation and serving of food should be regarded as part of the ritual of the banquet and, accordingly, themselves ritual in nature.

When it comes to the preparation of foodstuff at the banquet of Herod, the only "dish" (literally!) that is being discussed concerns the

²⁴ Consider, e.g., the creation of portions: does this happen in the kitchen, on a sideboard, at table, and by whom?

platter on which the head of John the Baptist is to be presented—in fact: served. That this is a perversion of a more common course of events is obvious. Grimes’s type 4, “violation,” referring to an effective (food *is* being served), but demeaning ritual (it is a human head!), comes to mind to capture this. That this way of serving food is a “flop” (type 2.4.), failing to produce the desired mood or atmosphere, is obvious. “Nonplay” (type 1.1.1.), a ritual that fails due to a lack of accepted conventional procedure, is another category that can be used to bring out aspects of what goes wrong. However, of particular interest is the role of the two women in all of this. The entire chain of events starts off with the dance of Herodias’s daughter, which leads to a position of influence and agency for her. She subsequently transfers this newly gained power to her mother by asking her for guidance. What is then suggested is a change in ritual, as it were: instead of presenting, say, a wild boar, on a platter, John the Baptist’s head is to be presented in this manner. When this is requested, it appears that gender roles, as they are associated with the preparation and serving of foodstuffs, have been reversed: the women command and request Herod to have John the Baptist killed (“slaughtered”) and then become part of their food preparation, which Herod and his banqueters cannot but accept as the only option “on the table.” Rather than being women who do as they are expected to (or as told), these two women claim the agency that is being given to them (due to lack of male self-control) and then act to thwart the rule of Herod—who, as the narrative had informed the reader, did not want to kill John—and decide in his stead over matters of life and, especially, death. This shift in ritual agency also means a shift in gender performance and attribution: the women stand out as masculine, in particular Herodias. At the same time, they stand out as perverted, due to their murderous intentions and manner of serving food—not because of the dance, to be sure!—but that is of lesser relevance for this argument.

4.5 *Excursus: Relating masculinity and religion integrally*

These various relationships between masculinity and ritual also give rise to reflection on how religion and masculinities can be related to each other analytically in a more comprehensive fashion. The following proposal may pave the way for this.

Both religious studies and studies of masculinities identify a number of dimensions that make up their object of research. In the case of religious studies and the history of religion, religion as “a medium of absence that posits and sets out to bridge a gap between the here and now

and something ‘beyond’” (Meyer 2015, 336), can be seen to have a number of dimensions:

- (a) ethical and social
- (b) ritual (private and public)
- (c) cognitive and intellectual
- (d) socio-political and institutional
- (e) symbolic (e.g., art and symbols outside of ritual)
- (f) experiential (e.g., a sense of vocation, of salvation).²⁵

In masculinities studies, masculinities are understood as patterns of practice that determine what is considered “masculine” in a gender order. Hegemonic masculinities are those patterns that allow those embodying them to occupy dominant positions in the gender order vis-à-vis those gendered differently. What they entail differs from context to context (cf. Connell 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Masculinities are constructed intersectionally, at the intersection of aspects such as health, sexuality, age, food consumption, etcetera (cf. Smit 2017). The combination of these two disciplines can be imagined as a matrix by means of which a source can be analysed from the vantage points of masculinities and the history of religion/religious studies simultaneously. A form of this matrix is given below. In the analysis of sources, it needs to be applied flexibly, not dogmatically as if in every source all dimensions of religion and masculinities play a role. Yet, a relatively broad scope in terms of possible dimensions and their relationship to each other ensures a broad perspective on the sources, necessary to do justice to the intersectionality at stake. At the same time, the research design is such that, should the sources give reason for this, additional dimensions and aspects can easily be added to the analysis. Using the dimensions of religion and aspects of masculinities just mentioned, such an analytical matrix can look as follows:

²⁵ See Hock (2014, 19–21); Smart (1996).

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| <p>X: Religion: (a) <i>Ethical/Social</i> (b) <i>Ritual</i> (c) <i>Cognitive/Intellectual</i> (d) <i>Sociopolitical</i> (e) <i>Symbolic</i> (f) <i>Experiential</i></p> <p>Y: Masculinities: (1) <i>Health (including physical integrity)</i> (2) <i>Sexuality</i> (3) <i>Age</i> (4) <i>Ethnicity</i> (5) <i>Consumption of food, drink, stimulants</i> (6) <i>Relationship to more and less masculine others</i> (7) <i>Use of power/violence</i> (8) <i>Intelligence/education</i> (9) <i>Job and job performance</i> (10) <i>Social status (incl. pedigree and affluence)</i> (11) <i>Virtuousness</i></p> |
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Concerning Mark 6, this matrix can be employed to further analyse the intersectional construction of masculinities. A precondition for this is to view both the meal of Herod and the meal of Jesus as “religious” in nature, in the sense that these are practices that mediate absence and create the transcendent, for instance the kingdom of God in the case of Jesus and (divinely legitimated) imperial power in the case of Herod. When doing this, it becomes apparent that the above focus on ritual can, in fact, be further differentiated. In order to test this, the aspects of masculinity (2), (5) and (6) have been singled out.

When considering category (2): sexuality and its intersection with the five dimensions of religion outlined here, it is clear that Herod’s failure to get a grip on himself vis-à-vis the dance of the princess (however innocent it may have been; the text is not interested in that), intersects with all five dimensions of religion. This amplifies insight into the kind of failure that occurs and also does justice to the intersectional character of the construction of masculinities. For instance, (a): the ethical and social dimension concerns the “unethical” character of Herod’s behaviour, which has everything to do with male sexual self-control (and the lack thereof). An evaluation is invited by the narrative, itself a product of a religious group. Secondly, (b): the ritual dimension is addressed because the dance is a ritual that is part of the banquet *qua* ritual, the (male) spectators are part of it and their masculinities are co-determined by their ritual behaviour, in this case something that is likely sexual in nature, at least as far as Herod is concerned (see v. 22 ἤρπασεν τῷ Ἡρώδῃ καὶ τοῖς

συνανακειμένοις, cf. Esth 2:4, 9). Finally, sexuality is related to (d): the sociopolitical dimension, given that it is precisely Herod's sexuality that begins to upset the (divinely legitimated) sociopolitical order that he represents. Another example would be (6): a person's relationship to more and less masculine others. In Mark 6 this concerns both Herod and Jesus (whose sexuality does not seem to play a role). Again, this has to do with the dimension of ritual (b), which has already been discussed: Jesus remains in control of the ritual, whereas Herod loses control. This also speaks to (e): the symbolic dimension, namely the functioning of both as symbols within the religious traditions that they represent. Not just things can be symbols; human beings are also part of a symbolic order and can function as highly evocative symbols, their masculinities making them more or less plausible symbols and, consequently, making the orders that they represent more or less attractive. This also impacts (10): social status, for reasons that will be apparent. Obviously, in a text in which food and meals play such a significant role, these also contribute to the construction of masculinities in relation to the various dimensions of religion. The consumption of certain foodstuffs and abstinence from others (5) is an important factor indeed, when one considers typically "male" foodstuffs and drink, for instance, red meat and alcohol. In Mark 6 the foodstuffs involved are the head of John the Baptist at Herod's banquet and the bread and fish at Jesus's meal in the wilderness. In both cases, the ethical/social dimension of religion (a) plays a role: the religious ethical codes of the Mediterranean world disapproved of the one and approved of the other (or were neutral about it), thereby negatively and positively influencing the perception of a person. As far as the ritual dimension (b) is concerned, the same applies. To the extent that foodstuffs also fulfil a symbolic role in religious traditions (e), the gesture of breaking bread in Jesus's case signifies community (literally) established by sharing whereas the presentation of a head on a platter signifies death.

Thus, drawing on a combination of dimensions of religion and aspects of masculinities, the analysis can be broadened and refined. The effect, of course, goes both ways: it is not just religion condoning or not condoning certain practices, even if this is very important; it is also about shaping religion through shaping masculinities. For instance, Jesus's performance of what may be called the banquet of the kingdom shows what true masculine identity is about *and* what the kingdom is about: both legitimise and reinforce each other.

5 Concluding Observations

The above presentation provides insight into the way in which masculinities are constructed and deconstructed through narrated rituals in a NT text. In order to analyse this, use was made both of ritual theory and theory concerning the construction of masculinity in antiquity. Gendered behaviour thus appeared at a place where it might not have been anticipated immediately. Also, the combination of ritual and gender studies points to the intersectional character of the construction of masculinity. Social status, economic resources, emotional self-control, and control over others, *inter alia*, play a role in and are aspects of the construction (and deconstruction) of masculinities in Mark 6. In addition, new light has been shed on the contents of Mark 6 as such, in which new dimensions were discovered, in particular pertaining to the role that masculinity plays in it, while the narrative function of the two contrasting meals, aiming at a contrast between Jesus and Herod as well as the kinds of rule they represent, was confirmed.

Furthermore, whilst the Markan narrative invites its audience to evaluate the two main characters, Herod and Jesus, it also goes beyond this. In inviting an evaluation of the two rituals narrated in the text—in line with the notion of ritual negotiation that involves the evaluation of ritual—the reading (or listening) community too becomes part of the ritual community involved in the two rituals in the text, as spectators and evaluators. When making up their minds as to which table fellowship under which man's direction is the more convincing, it may be speculated with some confidence that this community is also invited to reflect on the quality of their own meal fellowship and appertaining leadership. In this manner, the text facilitates a meeting of ritual communities and a trilateral comparison of masculinities: those of Herod, Jesus, and those existing in the Markan community (or any community of readers reading Mark).

In addition, exploring Mark 6 in terms of gender and ritual studies invites the exploration of other early Christian texts, including other narratives involving meals. In particular the notion of ritual failure could play a role here. Gospel literature would be an obvious starting-point, for instance the Gospel of Luke, known for its abundance of meals, but also a text like James 2, in which a meal gone wrong probably plays a role, could be a candidate. In texts like the latter, ritual, its failure, and the construction of gender, in particular of masculinity, can well be seen to intersect.

Finally, the use of Grimes's theory, and Hüsken's further theoretical considerations, also allow for a critical review of these categories and theory involved. While the broader theoretical perspective seems to be convincing and able to stand the test of its application to an early Christian text, the precise categories and their definition may well be in need of an update. The reason for surmising this is that multiple categories can often be seen to apply to a particular aspect of a ritual infelicity. In particular Grimes's categories, which were employed as a heuristic tool here, may be in need of further refinement and possible re-conceptualisations if they are to function as an analytical, not just a heuristic tool. That the categories as they stand are useful as a means of becoming aware of the various ways in which a ritual can fail or be "infelicitous" remains, however, beyond doubt.

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