

Mother Knows Best? Evaluating the Roles of Stoic Parents in (2000)

Abstract

My paper uses the 2000 Ridley Scott film _____ as a vehicle for exploring Stoicism, specifically the ways that Stoic parents ought to behave in different situations. The film includes a portrayal of the historic emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius and uses Stoic themes. I explore the ways in which two of the main characters, the general Maximus and Marcus Aurelius' daughter Lucilla, demonstrate Stoic values through their parenting. Through an analysis of the works of Stoic philosophers Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, I examine these characters' decisions and ultimately conclude that Maximus upholds Stoic values better than Lucilla. Through my paper I hope to invite a unique perspective on parenting that differs greatly from the modern, Christian-centered tradition and to give readers a clearer understanding of Stoicism.

The Oscar-winning film [Gladiator](#)¹ has been called “the most visually spectacular of all Roman Empire epics.”² Despite its historical inaccuracies, such as those Allen Ward examines in “The Movie ‘Gladiator’ in Historical Perspective,” the film “has sparked enormous interest in the history behind it” and brought back an appreciation for the ancient world.³ Many critical articles on [Gladiator](#) focus on its visual effects, Ridley Scott’s prowess as a director, and the characterizations of Maximus and Commodus, played by Russell Crowe and Joaquin Phoenix respectively.⁴ Connie Nielsen’s character, Lucilla, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned. When she is, reviewers emphasize her roles as Maximus’ past lover and as the incestuous object of Commodus’ lust. I will briefly engage with others’ interpretation of Lucilla and Maximus before arguing for my own.

Of the critical reviews I examined, only Colin Covert mentions Lucilla’s role as a mother; he claims that she “wants the throne for her own young son.”⁵ Though Covert believes that this desire motivates Lucilla to turn against her brother, I argue that she acts out of a sense of motherly duty and not ambition. When Lucilla meets Maximus in his cell to ask for his help, she explains, “I have been living in a prison of fear since that day [the day her brother murdered her father]. To be unable to mourn your father for fear of your brother. To live in terror every moment of every day, because your son is heir to the throne.”⁶ Lucilla enlists Maximus’ help not because she seeks to make her son emperor, but because, in her role as a parent, she wishes to remove Lucius from the threat posed by Commodus’ ambition. The few critics who analyze Maximus’ role as father predominantly focus on its success as a device to induce the audience’s sympathies. Steve Persall argues that “Crowe hints at humane regret underneath the fury ... He simply wants to retire to his family and farm. This death machine has a heart, never wearing it on his armored sleeve. Maximus stokes our emotions enough to make our temporary bloodlust justified.”⁷ I argue that while Maximus’ love for his family may induce sympathy from the audience, his role as father initially prevents him from performing his roles virtuously. His status as a father acts as an obstacle to virtue rather than as a way to invoke the audience’s pity. Manohla Dargis offers a different opinion:

When Maximus stares longingly at the effigies of his wife and child, it’s supposed to bring forth another reality for him, a world outside the arena, in much the same way that the tinfoil unicorn does for Deckard in [Blade Runner](#). But there’s only one reality for Maximus, that of gore and churning hate, and no matter how much Scott borrows from [Blade Runner](#), he can’t summon up the hurting human emotions that transformed that genre picture into a masterpiece.⁸

¹ [Gladiator](#), directed by Ridley Scott, Los Angeles: Universal, 2000. I thank [Gladiator](#)’s anonymous reviewer and Prof. Gregory S. Bucher for their helpful comments on this paper. I especially thank Prof. William O. Stephens for his encouragement and guidance in preparing this paper for publication.

² Michael Wilmington, “‘Glad’ Tidings: ‘Gladiator’ Is The Most Visually Spectacular Of Roman Empire Epics,” [Chicago Tribune](#), last modified May 5, 2000, accessed June 11, 2015, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2000-05-05/entertainment/0005050133_1_maximus-commodus-roman-empire-epics.

³ Allen Ward, “The Movie ‘Gladiator’ in Historical Perspective,” Classics Technology Center, AbleMedia, last modified 2001, accessed June 11, 2015, <http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/showcase/wardgladiator1.html>.

⁴ See “Gladiator Reviews,” [Flixster](#), accessed June 6, 2015, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/gladiator/reviews/?type=top_critics.

⁵ Colin Covert, “‘Gladiator’ emerges triumphant on an epic scale,” [Star Tribune](#), last modified Nov. 16, 2007, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.startribune.com/gladiator-emerges-triumphant-on-an-epic-scale/11487906/>.

⁶ DVD Chapter, “Terribly Vexed,”

⁷ Steve Persall, “Mad Maximus,” [SPTimes](#), last modified May 5, 2000, accessed June 6, 2015, http://www.sptimes.com/News/050500/Alive/Mad_Maximu.shtml.

⁸ Manohla Dargis, “Saving General Maximus,” [Law Weekly](#), last modified May 3, 2000, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.lawweekly.com/film/saving-general-maximus-2131976>.

I find completely unpersuasive Dargis' view that Scott fails to present Maximus' separate identities as soldier and family member. I contend that these two roles are clearly shown and clearly contrasted at several points throughout the film, allowing Maximus to undergo a character transformation as he decides which role it is best to fulfill in a given situation. My approach to the familial relations in the film explores the way that these relations, specifically between parents and children, affect the actions of the characters. My study of this topic is novel because it incorporates the values of Stoicism.

though undoubtedly greatly entertaining, has value that goes beyond the visual arts. For example, its portrayal of the Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, has sparked exploration of its Stoic themes.⁹ Although Stoicism is never explicitly mentioned in the film, several Stoic doctrines are evident in the characters' dialogue, such as Proximo's mantra, "We are but shadows and dust."¹⁰ The protagonist is Maximus, Marcus Aurelius' favored general. Maximus' journey becomes a lesson in virtue when viewed from a Stoic perspective. In the film, Marcus tasks Maximus with governing the Roman Empire until the Senate can govern it as a republic. Marcus chooses Maximus for this duty over his son Commodus, who merely seeks power and lacks the virtues Marcus believes are necessary for ruling. Maximus, however, wishes to return to his family so he can once again perform his roles as a husband and father. Maximus' choice between his duty as a general and his duty as a parent prompt my investigation into the treatment of his roles from a Stoic viewpoint.

Another important character, Marcus' daughter Lucilla, also faces difficult decisions regarding her parenting. After her brother Commodus kills their father to seize the throne, she must feign loyalty to him in order to protect both herself and her son, Lucius. However, she also recognizes her duty to remove Commodus from power for the good of Rome. Eventually Lucilla's role as a conspirator against Commodus and her role as a mother conflict, forcing her to choose between them. This conflict also invites investigation into the responsibilities of a Stoic parent. The right choice in Lucilla's situation does not necessarily mean that the safety of her child is the paramount goal, despite modern sensibilities.¹¹ While both characters demonstrate Stoic and non-Stoic behaviors in their parenting, I argue that Maximus ultimately upholds Stoic values through his parenting better than Lucilla does. The writings of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius will be the primary sources of my analysis.

The movie begins with Maximus' vision of walking through a field. He imagines himself at home with his beloved family while he waits on a battlefield for the bloodshed to begin. This opening scene makes Maximus' deepest desire clear: to return home and perform his roles as husband, father, and farmer. According to Epictetus, having a rational affection for one's family "is ... both right and good."¹² By nature, human beings ought to show their children "unfeigned love."¹³ Maximus, however, initially values his role as father above his role as a servant of the emperor, specifically as a general with a duty to protect the people of Rome. Recognizing Maximus' duty in this capacity, Marcus asks Maximus to complete a final task before returning home. After Marcus' death, Maximus will command the Roman Empire until the Senate can take over. When the emperor asks whether Maximus will accept

⁹ See John Sellars, "Stoics on the Big Screen: Marcus and Maximus," Classical Association Conference, University of Warwick, Apr. 2003; William O. Stephens, "The Rebirth of Stoicism?" Creighton Magazine (Winter 2000), 34-39, revised version online at http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/Stephens/rebirth_of_stoicism.htm; and William O. Stephens, , London: Continuum, 2012, Appendix: 161-170.

¹⁰ "Shadows and Dust,"

¹¹ See Connor Malloy, "The Irreligiosity of Sir Ridley Scott," , last modified Nov. 29, 2013, accessed June 11, 2015, http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/2751/The_Irreligiosity_of_Sir_Ridley_Scott.aspx.

¹² Epictetus: , trans. Robert Dobbin, 1.11.19, page 31.

¹³ Marcus Aurelius: trans. Gregory Hays 1.13, page 8.

this great honor, Maximus replies, "With all my heart, no."¹⁴ By declining this request, Maximus initially fails to set a good example for his son and mistakenly elevates his parental role above his role as a servant of Rome.

One could argue that Maximus' _____, the kind of person he is, motivates his decision. By fulfilling his _____, Maximus behaves in a Stoic manner. If Maximus believes he would be a better man by returning home to care for his family, then he is being true to the kind of person he is and thus acts stoically.¹⁵ However, before prioritizing their roles, Stoics must first consider their choices carefully and decide which role best serves the community at large and which best suits their own natural abilities. The more important role must be chosen by a system of reason; according to Epictetus, this system must be community-centered. A virtuous person "never acts in his own interest or thinks of himself alone, but ...all [his] actions and desires aim at nothing except contributing to the common good."¹⁶ Maximus soon realizes that Marcus is assigning him a role he must accept and that this role contributes to the common good more than his chosen role as father. Maximus asks his servant Cicero whether he finds it hard to do his duty, and Cicero replies, "Sometimes I do what I want to do. The rest of the time I do what I have to." Maximus chooses the latter course of action, telling Cicero, "We may not be able to go home after all."¹⁷ Despite his longing to return to his family, he recognizes that his duty trumps his desires. His son has managed to survive without a father for nearly three years, and Maximus' wife has been capable of raising him on her own. Maximus is not his son's only parent, but he is the only man Marcus Aurelius trusts to wield imperial powers when necessary. Maximus later recognizes the selfishness of his initial choice and prioritizes his role as a general. Although Maximus at first resists the logical choice, he eventually sets a good Stoic example for his son by accepting the responsibility of serving Rome above all as Marcus desired.

According to Stoic doctrine, Maximus' role as father ends with his son's death. Stoics do not believe in an afterlife,¹⁸ so his deceased son would not need a father. Maximus, however, believes that his son not only continues to exist after his body dies but that his son can hear and observe him from the afterlife. When a fellow gladiator, Juba, asks whether Maximus' family can hear him, Maximus answers affirmatively. Juba asks what he tells them, and Maximus replies, "To my boy, I tell him I will see him again soon, and to keep his heels down when he's riding his horse."¹⁹ Maximus believes his son still needs advice and guidance and so continues to provide them as his father. For this reason it is valid to assess Maximus' parental role even after his son's death, although Stoics hold that this role has ended.

Maximus initially disgraces his role as a father by using it to fuel his revenge. When Commodus first approaches Maximus in the arena, Maximus disrespects Commodus by turning his back on him, provoking the emperor to angrily demand to know his name. Maximus removes his helmet and reveals his face, identifying himself as a "father to a murdered son" and proclaiming, "I will have my vengeance in this life or the next."²⁰ Maximus invokes his role to justify his thirst for revenge, matching Commodus' anger at being disrespected with his own anger at Commodus ordering his family's murder. From a Stoic perspective, this behavior is completely unjustified. The historic Marcus Aurelius

¹⁴ "One More Duty,"

¹⁵ . 1.2.28, trans. Dobbin, 10.

¹⁶ 2.10.4, trans. Dobbin, 95.

¹⁷ "One More Duty,"

¹⁸ 4.21, trans. Hays, 41-42; see also William O. Stephens, "Epictetus on Fearing Death: Bugbear and Open Door Policy," 34, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 365-391.

¹⁹ "You Simply Won't Die,"

²⁰ "My Name is Gladiator,"

asserts that Stoics should “concentrate on [their responsibilities] ... without getting stirred up or meeting anger with anger.”²¹ Maximus forgets his responsibility to the murdered emperor and allows his grief and the burning desire for vengeance to overcome him. In this way Maximus fails to act as a Stoic father and a good role model for his son.

Maximus later experiences a turning point and replaces his desire for vengeance with the desire to serve Rome. When Maximus vanquishes both Tigris, an experienced and previously undefeated gladiator, and two tigers in the arena, Commodus again confronts him. He insults Maximus’ family by describing their deaths as disgraceful, saying that his son “squealed like a girl when they nailed him to the cross.” Rather than responding with anger as before, Maximus replies, “The time for honoring yourself will soon be at an end, Highness.”²² In this way he heeds the advice of the historic Marcus Aurelius, who suggests that if a person has been injured, he or she must “show the offender where he went wrong.”²³ Maximus emphasizes Commodus’ mistake by observing that his odious behavior is dishonorable. While Commodus attempts to incite rage in his enemy to drive him to act without logic—an attempt to “meet anger with anger”²⁴—Maximus presents a good example for his son and corrects Commodus’ mistake without acting rashly. If it were stoically proper to continue in one’s role as a parent to a dead son, then Maximus would fulfill his role as a good Stoic father by pursuing virtuous goals and properly performing the deeds dictated by his roles rather than seeking revenge.

Commodus’ sister Lucilla is mother to Lucius Verus. She first shows her affection for her son by embracing him when she returns to Rome from the frontier. When Commodus later observes the boy sleeping peacefully, he comments to Lucilla, “He sleeps so well because he is loved.”²⁵ As noted above, Stoics believe that the love a parent feels for her child is completely natural. Epictetus believes that “once a child is born, it is no longer in our power not to love or care for it.”²⁶ Lucilla puts Lucius’ needs before her own, acting in her role as a protective parent by conspiring to overthrow her brother. Lucilla recognizes that Commodus “hates all the world”²⁷ and is a wicked tyrant. She believes that removing her brother from power will benefit both her son and all of Rome.

Lucilla’s emotions eventually overcome her reason and lead her to act in an un-Stoic manner. When Commodus suspects Lucilla has been plotting his downfall, he threatens Lucius’ life. He tells her that if she does not reveal the details of the plan, he “shall strike down those dearest to you. You shall watch as I bathe in their blood.”²⁸ Although Lucilla’s betrayal is not shown, it is clear that Commodus’ threat to murder Lucius coerces her to reveal to him the planned coup. This betrayal violates a principle of Stoic ethics: One should “never regard something as doing you good if it makes you betray a trust.”²⁹ As a result of Lucilla’s betrayal, Cicero, Proximo, and some of the gladiators who help Maximus to escape are killed, and Maximus and the surviving gladiators are recaptured. Lucilla acts in an un-Stoic manner by allowing the fear of her son being harmed to overcome her sense of reason and her duty to depose her brother the tyrant.

²¹ 6.26, trans. Hays, 74.

²² “You Simply Won’t Die,”

²³ 5.22, trans. Hays, 61.

²⁴ 6.26, trans. Hays, 74.

²⁵ “I Shall Cheer for You,”

²⁶ 1.23.5, trans. Dobbin, 55.

²⁷ “Busy Little Bee,”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 3.7, trans. Hays, 31.

One could argue that Lucilla's role as a mother overrides her role as a conspirator. Epictetus, believing that his rival Epicurus advised parents to abandon their children, stated, "Even a sheep does not desert its own offspring, or a wolf; should a human desert his? Would you have us be as foolish as sheep or as savage as wolves—neither of which abandons its young? Come on, whoever remembers your advice when they see their little child fallen and crying on the ground?"³⁰

Epictetus insists that a parent's instinct to care for her child is natural even among animals. Lucius has no other parent to protect him, since his father has died. One could argue that, as Lucius' only surviving parent, Lucilla's maternal responsibility outweighs her duty as conspirator against Commodus. By fulfilling her role as a parent, she also fulfills her and thus acts as a Stoic mother should.

Despite this objection, I argue that Lucilla's role in the conspiracy overrides her role as mother for several reasons. First, both Epictetus and Marcus state that one should consider one's roles from a communal perspective. Epictetus defines a human being as "part of a community"³¹ and Marcus affirms that people exist for the sake of one another.³² Lucilla understands that revealing the conspiracy will lead to at least the arrest and likely the execution of those involved, and as a consequence that her brother will continue to rule. She knows that Commodus cannot justly perform the role of emperor, having seen for herself his treatment of the Senate—he threatens the life of Gracchus, one of the senators, when the man questions Commodus' devotion to the Roman people. Gracchus asks whether Commodus would embrace someone dying of the plague, and Commodus replies, "No. But if you interrupt me again, I assure you that you shall."³³ However, rather than considering her roles from a wider perspective and realizing how much the entire community would benefit from Commodus' being deposed, Lucilla focuses entirely on the threat to her son. Her fear of his suffering and death overcomes her sense of reason—had she considered her situation, she would have realized that her betrayal would not free Lucius from Commodus' threat. After she betrays Maximus and the other conspirators by divulging the details of the planned coup, Commodus affirms that the threat will hang over his nephew for the rest of his life. He says that Lucius will die if Lucilla "so much as looks at [him] in a manner that displeases [him]."³⁴ Lucilla fails to act as a Stoic parent by concentrating solely on her son rather than working on behalf of her community.

Lucilla's overwhelming fear that Lucius will die violates Stoic principles. By doing everything in her power to prevent her son from being murdered (including betraying her friends), Lucilla demonstrates her belief that death is harmful. Stoics, in contrast, do not view death as something which should be avoided at all costs. Epictetus states that "death and pain are not frightening, it's the fear of pain and death we need to fear."³⁵ Marcus shares this view, saying that parents should not value their child so much that their child's death would upset them.³⁶ If she were a Stoic parent, Lucilla would not be terrified by the possibility of Lucius dying. Her attempt to prevent his death shows that Lucilla considers her son's murder to be worse than allowing a corrupt ruler to remain in power. She values one

³⁰ 1.23.7-9, trans. Dobbin, 56.

³¹ . 2.5.26, trans. Dobbin, 88.

³² . 8.56, trans. Hays, 113.

³³ "The Greatness of Rome,"

³⁴ "Am I Not Merciful?"

³⁵ 2.1.13, trans. Dobbin, 78.

³⁶ . 7.27, trans. Hays, 89.

life above the many lives of both those involved in the conspiracy and ultimately all Romans, all of whom would be subject to Commodus' destructive rule. A Stoic parent would consider which actions are the most virtuous—such as keeping her promises and deposing a corrupt ruler—before considering what is best for her family.³⁷ By failing to keep her son's death in perspective and failing to adopt the Stoic belief that his death would not be the worst thing that could happen, Lucilla fails to set an example for her son as a Stoic mother.

An argument could be made that Lucilla's role as a sister to Commodus contravenes and defeats her role as a conspirator against him. At the beginning of the movie, her father Marcus Aurelius tasks Lucilla with helping Commodus, explaining that "he will need you now, more than ever."³⁸ This charge, coming from a man who is both her father and her emperor, seems more important than helping conspirators to take down her brother. In fact, Lucilla appears to defy Marcus' wishes. In plotting Commodus' downfall, Lucilla makes her brother her enemy and thus, according to Epictetus, becomes "a mean, snarling, dangerous beast."³⁹ Both by failing to obey her father's wishes and by failing to show Commodus respect and love as his sibling, one could argue that Lucilla does not act stoically.

When one carefully considers Marcus' request that Lucilla assist her brother, however, one realizes that the emperor intended an entirely different future for his son. Marcus had already decided that Maximus should serve as the temporary protector of Rome, as indicated by his conversation with the general in the next scene. Marcus knew that Commodus would need emotional support from his sister to accept this decision. Epictetus' comment about a sibling's role also becomes inapplicable when one considers Commodus' actions and his failure to perform his roles virtuously. Epictetus says that the gods "have released you from accountability for your parents, your siblings, your body, your possessions—for death and for life itself. They made you responsible only for what is in your power—the proper use of impressions."⁴⁰ Consequently, Lucilla is responsible for neither her brother's conduct nor his character, but she is responsible for taking action in a situation that calls for her to try to help depose him. Though viewers might believe that Lucilla best fulfills her role as a sister by keeping her brother alive and happy, Stoicism suggests that her duty is to remain devoted to the common good. While it might seem that Lucilla betrays her family by plotting against Commodus, her motivations—and thus her plans to depose her brother—are virtuous.

At the end of the movie, after Maximus kills Commodus and dies in the arena, Maximus' virtuous deeds are rewarded: he is reunited with his family in the afterlife. Although Lucilla ultimately fails to act as a Stoic mother, Maximus' victory frees Lucius from his uncle's threat. Both parents demonstrate mistakes in their parenting throughout the film, but it is Lucilla who succumbs to her irrational fears and Maximus who rises above his anger to embrace virtue. The study of these situations from the perspective of Stoicism offers a vastly different approach to what is ethical and right from what modern, Christian-centered ideals would advocate. From the Stoic perspective, feeling rage over a child's death and expecting to see one's family in the afterlife are character failures, while sacrificing one's child for a greater good is a justified action. While parents today are unlikely to find themselves in situations like those faced by Maximus and Lucilla, a study of can deepen our understanding of how Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius believed parents ought to weigh and enact their various roles. This film provides an excellent vehicle for those studying

³⁷ 3.3.5, trans. Dobbin, 146.

³⁸ "A Pleasant Fiction,"

³⁹ 2.10.13-14, trans. Dobbin, 96.

⁴⁰ 1.12.33-34, trans. Dobbin, 37.

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Stoicism to apply its doctrines to the actions and decisions of the filmic characters who lived during the same historical period in which the real Marcus Aurelius wrote the *Meditations*. Several critics have commented on the film's historical inaccuracy, both in terms of figures such as Marcus Aurelius and Commodus and in the way that the setting is presented in the movie.⁴¹ However, the film's lax attention to historical accuracy demonstrates that the Stoic themes present in *Gladiator* exist not strictly as a product of the film's historical context, but as a conscious decision on the part of the filmmakers. The Stoic lessons present in this film remain relevant even today. When the time comes to choose between what is best for the community and what is best for one's family, one could consider looking to Stoicism to decide which choice is the virtuous one to make.

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⁴¹ See "The Movie 'Gladiator' in Historical Perspective;" "'Gladiator' emerges triumphant on an epic scale;" and Joshua Griffin, "Not Such a Wonderful Life: A Look at History in *Gladiator*," IGN, Ziff Davis, last modified Feb 10, 2000, accessed June 11, 2015, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2000/02/10/not-such-a-wonderful-life-a-look-at-history-in-gladiator>.

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