Language and Meaning in Tacitus' *Annals*[*]

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ANTHONY J. WOODMAN (ED.), *THE ANNALS OF TACITUS: BOOK 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xxi + 349. ISBN 9781108419611. £84.99.

ANTHONY J. WOODMAN (ED.), *THE ANNALS OF TACITUS: BOOKS 5 AND 6*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xxi + 325. ISBN 9781107152700. £103.99.

RHIANNON ASH (ED.), *TACITUS: ANNALS BOOK XV*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 368. ISBN 9780521269391. £24.99.

KELLY E. SHANNON-HENDERSON, *RELIGION AND MEMORY IN TACITUS' ANNALS*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. x + 414. ISBN 9780198832768. £95.

THOMAS E. STRUNK, *HISTORY AFTER LIBERTY: TACITUS ON TYRANTS, SYCOPHANTS, AND REPUBLICANS*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. x + 221. ISBN 9780472130207. US$65.

> 'Verbal disharmonies reflect the complexities of history and all that is ambiguous in the behaviour of men. … His theme was savage and sinister, with no place for hope, ease or happiness. … Tacitus took possession of the Latin language, bent it to his will, and pushed to the utter limits all that it knew or promised of energy, gravity, and magnificence.'
>
> (R. Syme, *Tacitus*, 1958: 347–8, 358)

Sir Ronald Syme, whose appreciation of the greatest of Roman historians remains vivid, insightful and compelling more than sixty years after the publication of his monumental work, thus highlighted one of the most challenging and enriching aspects of our own engagement with this author—the simultaneous difficulty and resonance of his language. Any reader will recognise Syme's characterisation of a Latin language bent to Tacitus' will. Difficult for students, testing for experienced academics, Tacitus' Latin defies the morphology of the primer and the syntax of the grammar. Everything we learned from Cicero about Latin forms, balanced clauses, rhetorical crescendos and word-order is thrown by Tacitus into disarray. His use of Latin jars and disrupts. Even the call for *variatio* is subverted, with a conservative and limited vocabulary in play,[1] involving frequent repetition of key abstract terms, but conversely little pattern or regularity in the syntax of sentences. The 'verbal disharmonies' both challenge the reader and enrich the

[*] I should like to thank the three anonymous readers for their constructive criticisms and invaluable suggestions, as well as Myles Lavan for his generous help, patience and eagle-eyed attention to detail throughout the process of revision and publication. All remaining errors remain, of course, my own responsibility.

[1] Here I differ from Woodman 2004: xx–xxi, who sees *variatio* (including in vocabulary) as 'the term which best sums up Tacitus' stylistic technique'.

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meaning. The highly charged nature of Tacitus' Latin and its capacity, in his 'possession', to encapsulate the political complexities of the period is well established.[2] No word is casually or carelessly chosen; phrasing carries resonance; echoes are significant.

I

Few can claim as profound a knowledge of Tacitus' Latin as Tony Woodman. His translation of the *Annals* (2004) entailed a word-by-word exploration of this text, in which he concluded 'each of his sentences is studded with surprises of word or construction to arrest and then test readers as they make their way through them, a tortuous progress from revelation to revelation, each often more painful than the last'.[3] The translation made a positive virtue of conveying as accurately as possible the strain to which Tacitus subjects the Latin language. For W. it has been a life's project to engage with every word of Tacitus' text on the premise that each word, each letter carries meaning.

In no part of the Tacitean narrative is the tightly grained, tortuous, resonant language more prominent and appropriate than in the books devoted to the master of obscurity, Tiberius, and this hexad has dominated W.'s academic career. The publication of his commentaries on *Annals* 5–6 (2017) and *Annals* 4 (2018) concluded a monumental project to bring all six books of the Tiberian hexad into the *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries* ('Orange') series, a project begun with F. R. D. Goodyear's commentaries on Books 1 and 2 (1972 and 1981) and continued by the commentary on Book 3 by W. himself, in collaboration with R. H. Martin (1996). In one sense, of course, the project was already completed by the new commentary on Books 5–6 (2017), since Book 4 was the object of the first collaboration between W. and Martin, their exemplary 1989 volume in the *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics* ('Green and Yellow') series. W. presents the new commentary on Book 4 as a complete renovation (*Pref.* x). In fact, it remains in close conversation with its influential predecessor, with the 'new' commentary being used *inter alia* to offer revisions of previous views (e.g. 4.3.3, 4.57.2). We will return to the relationship between Green and Yellow and Orange.

The Tiberian commentaries bear reading in close conjunction with each other, since earlier volumes are frequently cross-referenced in subsequent publications and W.'s two most recent volumes avoid repetition of earlier elements. That on Book 4 offers a fuller (although modest) interpretative introduction and the volume on Books 5–6 book-ends its commentary with discussion of textual matters and an essay-like appendix, summarising W.'s take on 'The Tacitean Tiberius'.

Given W.'s appreciation of Tacitus' language, he is naturally well suited to the task of elucidating the text, word-by-word, in commentary form. Both new volumes are attentive to detail and alert to inter- and intratextual resonance. W.'s deep immersion in both Greek and Latin literature informs rich, intertextual readings that uncover multiple layers of meaning. At a general level, he observes the way in which Tacitus' articulation of Tiberius' reign into five acts, like an ancient drama, renders Book 4 the central act of the tragedy (2018: 12). In a different generic interface, W. notes how Tacitus' characterisation of Sejanus draws on Sallust's Catiline (4): the climax of Tacitus' sketch of Sejanus (4.1.3: *parando regno*) echoes Sallust's description of Catiline's ultimate ambition (*C.* 5.6: *dum sibi regnum pararet*). The ensuing analysis of the interplay between the Book 4 narrative, particularly Sejanus' role in it, and episodes in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* sets the tone for a reading of *Annals* 4 that will be linguistically rich, deriving its power from close attention to the text.

[2] Oakley 2010.
[3] Woodman 2004: xxi.

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Yet the commentaries often seem to hold back in interpreting the meaning of Tacitus' difficult, allusive text. The example just cited, in which Sejanus, likes Catiline, seeks to establish *regnum*, evokes an important but complex theme, the kingly Principate. It is striking that it is at first not Tiberius himself but his acolytes, such as Sejanus, who are most explicitly associated with the language of kingship and tyranny. Sejanus not only seeks *regnum* in 4.1.3, but only two chapters later seduces Drusus' wife with hopes of marriage, a share in *regnum* (*consortium regni*) and the murder of her husband (4.3.3). He is also associated with *saeuitia* (4.1.1) and *superbia* (4.1.3), both tyrannical attributes. Sejanus' cruelty, arrogance and ambition are finally brought together in the invective levelled at him by Titius Sabinus at 4.68.3: 'Now he laid into Sejanus even more boldly, his brutality, his pride and his ambition' (*audentius iam onerat Seianum, saeuitiam, superbiam, spes eius*). It is disappointing that W.'s commentary for 4.68.3 focuses on the use of the historical present tense rather than the importance of this verbal and thematic echo for Tacitus' historical interpretation of the relationship between Sejanus and Tiberius and the way in which Sejanus, throughout Book 4, is painted as a more brightly tinted version of the tyrannical figure that Tiberius will become, his true colours muted for now.

Elsewhere, W. stops tantalisingly short of articulating the full implications of his analysis. What is the significance of his observation that Tacitus' analysis of the internal politics of Seleucia (6.42.2) echoes the speech given by the Thebans at Thucydides 3.62.3 against the charge of medising? The allusion is evocative, but how does it play out? Still more thought-provoking is the similarity between Tiridates' eventual handing over of the government of Seleucia to the people (*rem Seleucensem populo permittit*) and Augustus' gesture of handing back the *res publica* to the senate and people of Rome (*Res Gestae* 34.1: *rem publicam ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium transtuli*: 'I handed over the state from my own control to the judgement of the senate and the Roman people'), while the reference to *concordia* at Selucia (*concordes agunt*, 6.42.3) evokes the loss of the Ciceronian Republic. The interpretative possibilities brought by the coexistence of a king alongside a restored Republic in Seleucia surely act as a prompt to reflect on Rome's internal political contradictions brought by the Principate.

W.'s restraint in fully exploiting his close engagement with Tacitus' Latin may owe something to the austerity of the Orange model, which brings us back to the question of the relationship between the two Cambridge series. The first two Orange commentaries, Gow's *Machon* and Page's *Aetna* (both 1965), set a strongly philological and specifically textual-critical tone.[4] By contrast, the Green and Yellow series has always had a broader remit: 'The emphasis in both introduction and commentary should be on the book concerned as a work of literature.'[5] This might suggest a division of labour between the two series, and W.'s two Orange commentaries do indeed pay meticulous attention to the establishment of a satisfactory text.[6] Yet it is easy to exaggerate the uniformity within each of the two series and the differences between them. Simon Malloch's recent Orange of *Annals* 11 includes notably more discussion of historical matters than Goodyear's two volumes on Books 1 and 2.[7] And the best of the Green and Yellows — including W. and Martin's *Annals* 4 — have never shied away from discussing important textual problems. Indeed, W.'s own recent Green and Yellow on Tacitus' *Agricola* exemplifies that series' capacity to blend breadth and depth of analysis.[8] So it

[4] See Gibson 2015, for a thorough characterisation of this series.
[5] Easterling 2007: 177.
[6] W. discusses textual issues at greatest length in his introduction to the Books 5 and 6 volume; but both volumes devote considerable attention to textual matters.
[7] Malloch 2013; Goodyear 1972; 1981.
[8] Woodman 2014, with Clarke 2018.

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is not at all obvious that the Green and Yellow on Book 4 needed to be 'upgraded' to Orange. Did the Orange Tiberian *Annals* need to be completed simply for completeness' sake?

II

The heft of the Green and Yellow series is well illustrated by Rhiannon Ash's new commentary on *Annals* 15, following her earlier *Histories* 2.[9] The breadth of her conception of the task of a commentator on a historical text is immediately apparent from her interweaving of textual, literary and historical themes in her introduction. The subtlety of both Tacitus' presentation of Nero's reign and A.'s reading of it are prefigured in introductory sections on 'The Perils of *Gloria*', in which A. notes Tacitus' refusal to draw stark contrasts between Nero and apparently worthier figures such as Corbulo and Seneca, and 'The Pisonian Conspiracy', where Tacitus' clever use of conspiracy narratives to construct his own 'thriller' is detailed. Author, text and historical context are all under the spotlight, as they will be throughout the commentary proper. A.'s detailed engagement with Tacitus' text is reflected in the index, which, alongside proper names and thematic entries, encompasses a vast range of philological, linguistic and stylistic themes. A.'s claim that 'style as a bearer of historical meaning is a powerful weapon in T.'s hands' (22) sets the tone for a commentary which will be rich in close readings, literary sensitivity and historical interpretation.

A single extended example illustrates the benefits of A.'s close reading of the text. Book 15 opens in the East as the question of who has the right to determine the royal succession in Armenia comes to a head. Tigranes, Rome's appointment, is under threat of being usurped by Tiridates, the nominee of the Parthian king Vologeses. At stake here are questions which are rolled out in different locations around the empire throughout the *Annals*: who has the right to determine the Armenian, or any other, crown? Who is most expert in the instatement of kings? The narrative gives rise to a series of contrasts and rivalries. Rome reasserts its control as Corbulo moves to oversee Vologeses' withdrawal from Armenia and props up the Roman nominee, Tigranes. But soon the Roman front itself is revealed to be disunited as Paetus, Corbulo's second-in-command, promises 'that he would soon impose on the conquered tribute and laws and Roman administration (*tributa ac leges et … Romanum ius*), instead of the empty shadow of a king (*umbra regis*)' (15.6.4). As A. hints, the 'colourful periphrasis' for Tigranes sounds almost evocative of Vergil's 'phantom' Aeneas at *Aeneid* 10.636; but any epic elevation is outweighed by the ominous echo of Varus' belief that the Germans could easily be softened up by *ius* (Velleius Paterculus 2.117.3). Yet Paetus' denigration of Rome's Armenian king as a shadow is later thrown back at him by Vasaces, a Parthian commander, who disputes Rome's right to appoint kings in Armenia by claiming that 'we had the mere shadow of possession and bestowing, while the reality of power lay with the Parthians' (15.14.2: *Vasaces imaginem retinendi largiendiue penes nos, uim penes Parthos memorat*). Here Paetus' own denigration of Rome's Armenian king as a shadow is thrown back at him in Vasaces' description of Rome's mere shadow of control over the Armenian succession. Both Rome and Parthia seem in unlikely agreement that kings appointed by Rome are of only illusory significance. The full force of the scene, with its composite perspective and shared recognition of the truth, is illuminated by A.'s meticulous linguistic analysis. As she notes, the repetition of *penes* 'sharpens Vasaces' point by perfectly balancing *nos* and *Parthi*: and the alliterative *penes Parthos* offers a forceful climax. The pronoun *nos* paradoxically preserves the Roman

[9] Ash 2007.

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perspective, despite the Parthian speaker' (103). Tacitus' Latin demands the closest attention to extract its full meaning. The suggestion that Roman-sponsored kingship is but an empty piece of theatre will be reinforced by the heavily staged manner of Tiridates' setting down of the Armenian crown in front of the emperor's image with a view to receiving it back from Nero himself (15.29.1). The 'fabulous visual display surrounding Tiridates and his diadem aptly concludes a "phantom" war', as A. notes (137). But, of course, the staginess is also evocative of the nature of power in Rome: 'Theatricality and display define Neronian Rome' (156), as will become apparent as the narrative plunges back into Nero's thespian aspirations. The power of Tacitus' political commentary is deeply embedded in his Latin, brought under his possession, bent to his will, and 'pushed to the utter limits'.

A.'s Green and Yellow commentary on *Annals* 15 offers a different experience from Woodman's Orange volumes — although less different from his own Green and Yellow on the *Agricola*. The differences between these volumes invite reflection on the commentary form, particularly when applied to historical texts. 'Commentaries are thriving', as Chris Kraus has observed, and Tacitus is no exception.[10] The recent volumes by Woodman and A. follow commentaries of various hues on *Germania*, *Agricola*, *Annals* 11, *Histories* 1 and *Histories* 2, to name only some of the more widely used Anglophone works published in the last twenty years.[11] Much insightful scrutiny has been lavished on the commentary form in recent years, but historical texts raise some very particular challenges, illustrated by a particularly broad spectrum of approaches. Writing about her earlier commentary on *Histories* 2, A. has characterised her own approach as 'historiographical' — a 'middle way' between G. E. F. Chilver's 'historical' commentary on the same text and Woodman's more 'literary' approach (epitomised by his commentaries on Velleius Paterculus).[12] This middle way emerges as particularly well suited to the explication of historical texts. But the boundaries are blurred on all fronts, individual preferences will vary and it is undeniable that both Woodman and Ash execute their task with energy, precision and sensitivity, illustrating the particular merits of the commentary form in grappling with Tacitus' challenging text. The commentary is a 'continually evolving organism', a notion to which readers will rightly hold authors and publishers.[13]

III

Of course, the commentary form does not have a monopoly on close textual engagement. Kelly Shannon-Henderson's *Religion and Memory in Tacitus*' Annals offers an analysis of Tacitus' account of the decline in Roman religion that accompanied the developing Principate — a reading of Tacitus' Tiberian books that complements Woodman's commentaries.

S.-H. builds on the work of David Levene and Jason Davies, among others. Levene's systematic analysis of Livy showed that he manipulates the religious material in his work for literary, dramatic and moralising effect, particularly in the context of Rome's pious or impious relationship with the divine, a model to which S.-H. clearly owes a good deal.[14] Davies considered religion in Tacitus in the context of a larger comparative analysis of three historians; he suggested that the 'radically conservative' Tacitus

[10] Kraus 2002: 23.
[11] Rives 1999 on *Germania*; Woodman 2014 on *Agricola*; Malloch 2013 on *Annals* 11; Damon 2003 on *Histories* 1 and Ash 2007 on *Histories* 2.
[12] Ash 2002: 279–92; 2007.
[13] Kraus and Stray 2015a: 1.
[14] Levene 1993.

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characterises the reigns of individual emperors through a narrative of undulating religious decline under the Julio-Claudians and restoration under the Flavians.[15] S.-H. is able to develop in greater depth and detail some of Davies' propositions concerning Tacitus' interest in human dealings with the world of the divine as a barometer of the exercise of political power by successive *principes*.

In framing her contribution to the subject, S.-H. highlights her use of the theoretical framework of cultural memory. But the methodological paradigm is not as central to the monograph as this suggests, nor does it contribute significantly to our appreciation of how and why Roman religious practice has declined over time. One difficulty may be that cultural memory offers a more illuminating explanatory framework for the perpetuation of tradition than for its demise. In any case, the originality of S.-H.'s study lies in its detailed readings of individual episodes in Tacitus' text. While it has become common for the scholarly treatment of literary texts to adopt the form of a series of close readings, it is particularly welcome to find this episodic approach applied to a specific aspect of Tacitus' narrative. In an academic environment where companion volumes abound, including some excellent ones devoted to Tacitus in the last decade, this is where the real value of S.-H.'s study lies.[16]

The book addresses fundamental questions concerning Roman religion: how do the gods express their pleasure or displeasure? How can events be predicted? Why do things happen? And, perhaps the most pressing one of all, how do humans gain, maintain or — more pertinently here — lose their positive relationship with the gods? The first two substantive chapters act as a pair, using the prism of religious observation to throw into relief a *princeps* and his potential rival to power. In chapter 2, S.-H. explores key episodes from *Annals* 1 and 2 which reveal different facets of Tiberius' autocratic rule. His refusal to acknowledge the flooding of the Tiber as a religious episode sets him in opposition to the more traditional approach of the senate and illustrates his characteristic obfuscation ('concealing divine matters just as he did human ones', 1.76.1). As S.-H. suggests by opening her analysis of the Tiberian hexad with this episode, Tiberius' ineptitude in religious interpretation combines with his refusal to allow the senate their traditional arbitration over which occurrences constitute a religious problem to generate a toxic situation which visibly jeopardises Rome's relationship with the gods. Tiberius' lack of transparency is mirrored by the senate's own disingenuousness in their handling of imperial cult and *maiestas* trials. Just as Tiberius' monopoly over religious explication places Rome at risk of divine retribution, so too does the habit of dissimulation have negative consequences for Rome's relationship with the gods. S.-H. sheds new light on broader historical debates concerning the relationship between *princeps* and senate by focusing on the battle for religious authority and the right to regulate Rome's relationship with the divine.

In the case of Tiberius' potential rival for imperial power, Germanicus, S.-H. reveals through episodes such as the German mutiny and the Teutoburg forest scene that he is no less a rival in the field of religious interpretation than in the political sphere. This chapter echoes Pelling's influential reading of Germanicus as a flawed Tacitean character,[17] with sharp insights into Germanicus' attempt to monopolise religious interpretation, his troubling application of whimsical desire (*cupido*) to the burial of the soldiers' remains and the frenzied reactions to his death in Rome. However, S.-H. also uses intertextual correspondence to add depth to Pelling's picture. The resonances of Germanicus' visit to Colophon are read against the backdrop of Livy's description of Aemilius Paullus' visits to the oracles of Apollo at Delphi and Zeus Trophonios at

[15] Davies 2004.
[16] Woodman 2010b; Ash 2012; Pagán 2012.
[17] Pelling 1993.

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Lebadeia (Livy 45.27.6–8), to which S.-H. argues we are clearly directed through verbal similarities and explicit mention of Delphi (106). Paullus' propensity to make sacrifices here and throughout his journey contrasts markedly with Germanicus' failure to perform a single sacrifice, the intertext accentuating the latter's relative lack of ritual piety.

From Tiberius and Germanicus, rival readers of the religious landscape, S.-H. traces the decline of religious understanding and observance in Rome in other constituencies. She demonstrates in particular how traditional forms of religious observance, undertaken by the senate and priests on behalf of the Roman people to maintain good relations with the gods, are overshadowed or marginalised by the attention demanded by a different object of deference, the imperial family. The debate over whether the *flamen dialis* should be allowed to leave Italy in contravention of traditional rules governing his conduct neatly illustrates the clash of religious authorities — here those of the emperor and of the priesthood's own traditions (*Ann.* 3.58). Interwoven with these discussions are proposals to honour Drusus with *tribunicia potestas* (3.56 and 59). The reading illustrates S.-H.'s careful and productive attention to textual details. The observation (148) that Drusus' honours are described as *caerimoniae*, the word used by the current *flamen dialis* Servius Maluginensis to describe the regulations of his office (3.58.1), reinforces the implication that honours 'granted to the Imperial family overshadow traditional religious concerns'.

S.-H. shows that Tacitus' treatment of religious memory reproduces in miniature many aspects of his larger narrative of political and cultural transformation. Developments can, as she suggests (354), be visualised both as an arc, as the Principate (and *Annals*) move inexorably on and down, and as a spiral, in which individuals reiterate and progressively strengthen inherited faults. These structures, which S.-H. reveals through the lens of religious amnesia, neglect and ignorance, map well onto other aspects of Tacitus' narrative. But one might further complicate S.-H.'s arcs and spirals by adding a third metaphor — modulation — to capture aspects of the narrative that challenge the notion of steady decline and downward spirals. Rather than wrestling, as S.-H. does, with Claudius' attempts at traditional religious adherence as ineffective aberrations from the dominant direction of travel, one could see him as more emphatically bucking the trend. One might find a parallel in the fact that his reign witnesses a reduction in the regal language that pervades Tacitus' account of the Tiberian and Neronian tenures. As ever, the richness and resonance of Tacitus' text benefits from close engagement.

IV

From one treatment of imperial tyranny to another. Thomas E. Strunk's *History After Liberty: Tacitus on Tyrants, Sycophants, and Republicans* offers a thematic analysis of *libertas* in Tacitus under the corrupting influence of the Principate. After setting up the central proposition — that Tacitus adheres to a republican notion of *libertas* that is challenged by, even incompatible with, the Principate — S. illustrates this through a series of encounters between emperors and different constituencies: military commanders (Domitius Corbulo), senators (M. Aemilius Lepidus and Thrasea Paetus), proponents of free speech (the historian Cremutius Cordus) and Tacitus himself. S.'s reinstatement of Tacitus as a 'revolutionary writer' (4) as opposed to Mommsen's monarchist or a proponent of *moderatio* and survival — the so-called middle way — is extremely attractive. As S. argues, the progressive watering-down of Tacitus' scathing criticism of a system which was fundamentally antithetical to *libertas* was due for challenge. On the array of colour swatches used to describe Tacitus' political stance, S. shuns the black of the monarchist and the pink of the compromised survivalist, in favour of bright revolutionary red.

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S. embarks on his thesis by first attacking the foundations of the 'compromise view', based on passages such as *Annals* 4.20 and *Agricola* 42. In the former, Tacitus praises M. Lepidus for picking his way along a middle path between 'sheer defiance' (*abrupta contumacia*) and 'shameful sycophancy' (*deforme obsequium*); in the latter, Tacitus notes the mollifying effect on Domitian of Agricola's 'moderation' (*moderatio*) and 'caution' (*prudentia*) by which he steered clear of 'defiance' (*contumacia*) and a 'futile display of freedom' (*inani iactatione libertatis*). Tacitus further observes the capacity of those following the route of 'obedience and submission' (*obsequiumque ac modestiam*) to achieve the same glory as those pursuing the sheer path (*abrupta*), which is deemed useless to the *res publica* and brought to an end by a showy death (*ambitiosa morte*). It might seem that the two passages point in the same direction — both advocating the avoidance of defiance; both steering clear of the precipitous cliff-edge and sticking to a safer, less vertiginous path. But S. observes a 'glaring contrast' in their use of the term *obsequium,* and 'for an author who chooses his words carefully this is no small matter' (21). While M. Lepidus is praised for steering a course that avoids shameful subservience (*deforme obsequium*), in the *Agricola obsequium* is seen, along with *modestia*, as the pathway to a level of praise which equals that of those pursuing the cliff-top path.

S.'s case is based on a careful reading of Tacitus' Latin.[18] It is indeed hard to see how *obsequium* can be both the route to glory and a quality to avoid. Yet a closer reading suggests that Lepidus and Agricola might be more closely aligned than S. suggests, since it is specifically *deforme obsequium* which Lepidus rightly avoids, a different matter from the measured *obsequium* that might lead to praise. In any case, S. himself goes on to elide the putative differences between these two figures, in his search for coherence in Tacitus' political stance. Having argued that M. Lepidus and Agricola are *not* that similar, S. back-tracks to group this pair, together with Thrasea Paetus, as men who resist the tyranny of the Principate by continuing to act as though in service of the Republic. The passages are thus re-focused as illustrative of the rejection by such figures of an ill-defined middle way in favour of exercising their 'free choice, an act of *libertas*, to serve the *res publica*' (22). But close reading offers a further twist. The praise accruing to the man of *obsequium* and *modestia* is equivalent to that won by those who plummet off the cliff-top path in a showy death with no benefit to the *res publica*. While *Agricola* 42 is frequently adduced as evidence that Tacitus advocates survival through moderation, a more ambiguous message emerges. Ostentatious, presumably politically motivated, deaths may be of no use to the *res publica,* but they do win *laus* for the individuals concerned, and they do so within the pages of Tacitus' own writings, as illustrated by the catalogue of deaths in the later books of the *Annals*.[19] Pressing on relentlessly through the passage, word by word, enriches but simultaneously complicates the picture.

S.'s reading of Tacitus as a revolutionary republican, while attractive in itself and compellingly propounded, risks oversimplifying a notoriously complex author, who embraces contradictions (*Ann.* 1.9–10). While the *Agricola* leaves us in little doubt as to the futility of showy martyrdoms, the *Annals* generate real ambiguity around opposition figures such as Thrasea Paetus. When he intervenes in the first *maiestas* trial of Nero's reign, 'Thrasea's free speech broke the subservience of others' (14.49.1), proving an effective disruptor of imperial will. On the other hand, Thrasea's gesture of opposition in walking out of the senate in disgust at senatorial flattery of Nero following

[18] See, by contrast, Kapust 2011: 111–40, arguing the case for political compromise, but on the basis of political theory rather than close textual engagement.

[19] Sailor 2008: e.g. 16–23, 99–103, 113–16 and *passim*, on the contradictions embraced by Tacitus in relation to martyrdom. Also Woodman 2018 *ad loc.*

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Agrippina's death fails to inspire *libertas* in others (14.12.1). For every instance of Thrasea's effective service to the *res publica*, 'turning the situation to public benefit' (15.20.2), there is a counter-balance.[20]

S.'s reading of his protagonists as a homogenous group of praiseworthy characters working for the good of the *res publica*, elides both differences between them and internal inconsistencies. Thrasea may be one of the *egregii viri* mentioned at 15.23.4 and given a spectacular death-scene in which he ostentatiously pours libations of blood to Jupiter the Liberator (16.35.1), but his service to the *res publica* is contestable. A similar tendency to gloss over the negatives qualities of 'praiseworthy' figures extends to the treatment of military commanders in chapter 2. S. acknowledges readings which question an unremittingly positive portrayal of Germanicus, but is nevertheless tempted by references to his virtues and particularly his inherited republican associations (52–4), side-lining the possibility that he is rather misaligned with the world in which he lives. Meanwhile, S.'s praise of Corbulo for resisting the Principate 'by serving the *res publica*, not the *princeps*' (67) is still more difficult to reconcile with Tacitus' presentation of this general as an intensely self-centred seeker of personal glory, paying little heed to the greater good of Roman troops and ultimately generating a situation in which 'the competitive drive for virtue and the desire for glory had perished' (15.16.4).[21] However appealing it is to repaint Tacitus in glorious red, the complexity of his characters resists easy categorisation.

Although S. claims to be setting the record straight on years of misinterpretation in sealing Tacitus' reputation as a revolutionary thinker, there is plenty of well-judged compromise in S.'s work that reflects the subtlety of Tacitus' own political thought, and the considerable amount of overlap with the interpretations of other scholars makes this a less-than-revolutionary volume. S.'s twofold understanding of *libertas* as 'freedom from domination' and 'freedom to participate in the politics of a free state' (23) is, for example, very familiar from Chaim Wirszubski.[22] S. at times seems not far divergent from Daniel Kapust with his notion of a 'Pink Tacitus', who was sufficiently realistic to support or at least live with the Principate, while remaining deeply critical of the opportunities for tyranny which it afforded.[23] Nevertheless, the reassertion of a more fiercely political Tacitus remains welcome in an age when the global threat of dictatorial power looms large.

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The difference between Strunk's exposition of the thesis that Tacitus is a politically subversive thinker and Shannon-Henderson's sequence of close readings may seem subtle, but it highlights the question of how a text which 'reflects the complexities of history' might best be encouraged to reveal them. This brings us back to the centrality of language and style to the interpretation of Tacitus's text, not in spite of but because of its tortured difficulty. The commentary form remains an important vehicle — though by no means the only one — for the requisite language-focused analysis. Woodman himself has made a rousing case for the ongoing relevance of reading Tacitus, and for doing so in his disharmonious, barely tamed Latin: 'Anyone who cares about the past and about literature will regret deeply the danger that within a relatively short time,

[20] Sailor 2008: 114 sees the exceptional status of the super-martyrs such as Thrasea and Helvidius as setting an uncomfortably high bar for Tacitus' presentation of the more muted Agricola. The contradictions evident in Tacitus' portrayal of paradigmatic martyrs might, therefore, be seen as one way of diminishing their unattainable model.

[21] Ash 2006 and 2018, discussed above, proposes a more problematic characterisation of Tacitus' Corbulo, negatively intensified through allusions to Lucullus.

[22] Wirszubski 1950.

[23] Kapust 2012.

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perhaps within the foreseeable future, no one will any longer be able to read the texts of this transcendent writer in the language in which he wrote them.'[24] But this should be seen as a project critical not only for those who care about the past. Never has Tacitus' analysis of tyrannical power in all its guises seemed more urgently relevant to the present and future than now. If the complexities of history are embedded in the language of his works, then let us keep reading them carefully, intently and word by word.

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[24] Woodman 2010a: 14.

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