

## BOOK REVIEW

*Tacitus*. Edited by RHIANNON ASH. Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 475. Hardcover, £100.00/\$185.00. ISBN 978-0-19-928508-2. Paper, £40.00/\$75.00. ISBN 978-0-19-928509-9.

In his 1950 essay “Tacitus Now,” the literary critic Lionel Trilling describes the experience of reading Books 1–6 of the *Annals* in this way: “We are irresistibly reminded of Proust when Tacitus sets about creating the wonderful figure of Tiberius and, using a hundred uncertainties and contradictions, tries to solve this great enigma of a man, yet always avoids the solution because the enigma is the character.” Trilling’s assessment of Tacitus’ Tiberius can be said of the author himself, whose writings about the early Roman Empire (the monographs *Agricola* and *Germania*, the *Dialogue on Orators*, and the historical works the *Histories* and *Annals*) continually present the reader with inconsistencies, contradictions, and unresolved tensions—a reflection of the political and cultural atmosphere of Tacitus’ time. The eighteen essays in this volume, chosen by Rhiannon Ash to stand as “a representative sample of some of the most important articles on Tacitus” (v), turn again and again to the tensions, enigmas, and richly “unfixed” characteristics of the author’s writing.

The volume’s selections span over fifty years (from 1950 to 2002), with representative essays by the leading lights of Tacitean scholarship from this period (Syme, Martin, Goodyear, Woodman); in this regard the collection stands as a sort of history of Tacitean scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century. Several of the essays were first published in prominent Classical journals and are thus accessible to many through digital libraries such as JSTOR. However, per the aims of the *Oxford Readings* series (i), Ash has included many that are harder to find, having first appeared in edited volumes (the pieces by Levene, Luce, Pelling, and Woodman) or as chapters in book-length studies or collections (those by Bartsch, Bloch, Ginsburg, Momigliano, Paratore, and Trilling). The selections by Bloch, originally in German, and Paratore, originally in Italian, have been translated for the volume by David Ash and Francesca Albini, respectively. Most of the pieces include updated footnotes, and about half are followed by

addenda or postscripts with additional bibliography. In short, this collection has much that is new, and the gathering of these pieces from disparate places into one volume is of great value. Furthermore, some of the pieces have seemingly receded from scholarly attention, and Ash's bringing them into clearer light is a service to scholars and students of Tacitus and the Roman Empire (I note in particular the essays by Momigliano and Trilling and the close reading of *Historiae* 3.38–9 by Miller and Jones).

Ash's Introduction surveys approaches to Tacitus from the sixteenth into the twenty-first centuries before contextualizing the essays that follow in the broader scholarly discourse. The selections are arranged chronologically by work, beginning with two pieces on what is generally regarded as Tacitus' inaugural work, the *Agricola*, a biography of his father-in-law Agricola, the governor and conqueror of Britain under Domitian. Katherine Clarke's 2001 article considers the remote, detached island of Britain as the ideal arena for "Republican-style" excellence under the tyrannical Domitian, whose power Agricola nevertheless serves by conquering the island and attaching it to the empire. W. Liebeschuetz grapples with similar paradoxes in his 1966 piece on the theme of liberty—or "preserv[ing] one's self-respect in the face of despotism amid adulation" (85)—in the *Agricola*, an issue that is central to all of Tacitus' writing. Ellen O'Gorman's 1993 piece, the one essay in the volume concentrating on the *Germania*, regards this ethnography of the German peoples as offering a mirror on the decadent Rome of Tacitus's time. O'Gorman may overstate her case (she downplays the less admirable characteristics of the Germans that Tacitus includes), but the piece is packed with good ideas about the unsteadiness of Roman identity in Tacitus' time. On the minor (or, better, earlier) works, next come pieces by Shadi Bartsch (1994) and Sander Goldberg (1999) on the *Dialogue on Orators*. Bartsch aims to resolve a notorious problem in this work, the inconsistency between the independent-minded Maternus at the opening of the dialogue and the seemingly more complacent and obedient Maternus at the end. She suggests that in the latter instance this character engages in deliberately indeterminate "double-speak," which can have different meanings to different members of the imperial audience. Goldberg's piece concentrates not on Maternus but on the modernist Aper, advocate of a utilitarian, contextually based approach to oratory. To her piece Bartsch has added a footnote (139 n. 48) to John Penwill's illuminating article in *Ramus* (32 (2003) 122–47), which complements both Bartsch's and Goldberg's arguments. Penwill argues that it is the late arrival of the imperial power-player (and half-brother of the infamous prosecutor

Aquilius Regulus) Vipstanus Messala that alters the context, and leads to Maternus' seeming about-face.

The translated selection from Ettore Paratore's *Tacito* (1951; second edition, 1962) bridges the early and the historical works by observing the evolution of Tacitus' thought about Roman imperial practice from the *Agricola* to the gloomier outlook of the *Annals*. The account of Roman offenses against the British in *Annals* 14 that is much gorier than the equivalent in the *Agricola* demonstrates his point well. On the *Histories* Ash has included two pieces focusing on Tacitus' presentation of the short-lived emperor Vitellius. N. P. Miller and P. V. Jones offer a pair of sharp close readings of the structure, word order, and diction of *Hist.* 3.38–9, the account of the fall of Junius Blaesus to the machinations of the emperor's brother. David Levene examines this and later passages in *Hist.* 3 about the doomed Vitellius, with a concentration on how Tacitus both describes the pity and fear experienced by characters and induces the audience to experience those emotions with the characters. These two methodologically diverse essays on *Hist.* 3 make for fitting inclusions in this volume. A worthy complementary piece on the *Histories* that the reader may consider is B. Walker's "A Study in Incoherence: The First Book of Tacitus' *Histories*" (*CP* 71 (1976) 113–18), an article that guides the reader through the high-speed crash of the state that Tacitus narrates in *Hist.* 1 while also offering a taste of Walker's influential work, which is seen most fully in her *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History* (Manchester, 1952).

Five selections focus on the *Annals*. Ronald Martin's classic 1955 article considers the meaningful parallels that Tacitus draws between the opening of Tiberius' and Nero's reigns, each inaugurated with a murder. Next comes a 1958 piece by Sir Ronald Syme, whose monumental two-volume *Tacitus* arrived that same year, and whose influence pervades Tacitean studies (his views come up repeatedly in the body and footnotes of this volume's other selections). The piece by Syme that Ash has chosen, on obituary notices in the *Annals*, represents well his knowledge of the prosopography of the early empire and his ability to put that knowledge towards interpretive ends (arguing in this case that the decline in the number of obituary notices from the Tiberian to the Neronian books speaks to the disappearance of the Republican-style figures who merited such notices). Syme's article addresses Tacitus' freedom within the annalistic form, an issue that Judith Ginsburg considered on a larger scale in her *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (New York, 1981). Excerpted here is her chapter on the histori-

an's manipulation of year-beginnings for thematic purposes in *Ann.* 1–6 (her inquiry has now been resumed by Salvador Bartera, who considers this issue for *Ann.* 13–16 in *MH* 68 (2011) 161–81). Christopher Pelling's 1993 piece sees in the character Germanicus many of the problems that feature in Tacitus' work as a whole: like the Republic itself, Germanicus is brilliant and noble, but also brilliantly anachronistic, and ill-suited for the "grimy and stifling realities of imperial politics" (297). Pelling's essay (much like Liebeschuetz's) cuts to the core of the problem under the empire of traditional nobility and service to the state. In the final selection focusing on the *Annals*, Tony Woodman brings his unmatched eye for literary artistry to *Ann.* 15.36–7, where Tacitean allusion, metaphor, and manipulation of *topoi* and genre serve to transform Nero's Rome into a decadent Eastern city. The chapter's postscript points to several of Woodman's later pieces on Tacitean metaphor, to which should be added his recent exploration of medical metaphors in Latin historiography (*PLLS* 14 (2010) 43–61). A fitting complement to these pieces on the *Annals*, one that looks into the Tiberian, Claudian, and Neronian books, is Elizabeth Keitel's pioneering article on the imagery of civil war in the *Annals* (*AJP* 105 (1984) 306–25).

Two broader explorations then follow. T.J. Luce's 1986 piece, like so many others in this volume, confronts the inconsistencies in Tacitus' thinking, the "protean nature" (350) of his judgments; he concludes (much like the character Aper on whom Goldberg concentrates) that to the historian Tacitus universals mean much less than the particularity of events. F. R. D. Goodyear's 1968 article makes a similar point about the ever-changing quality of Tacitus' Latin. In response to the view that his language becomes simpler and more Ciceronian in *Annals* 13–16, Goodyear asserts rather that the author is always adding and discarding words and stylistic features, that "the endless experiment with his medium," more than any particular manner of writing, is what is "Tacitean" (369).

The volume concludes with three selections on the reception of Tacitus. A chapter from René Bloch's 2002 book on ancient perceptions of Judaism looks closely at the reception of one passage, the excursus on the Jews at *Hist.* 5.2–13. Bloch calls attention to the propensity of many readers to use the Tacitean passages that serve their purposes while suppressing more problematic passages such as this infamous excursus. Momigliano's eminently rich chapter (first delivered as part of his Sather Lectures in 1962, published in 1990) leads us through the age of "Tacitism" in the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, when the historian became popular among political actors and theorists as one who, to use the celebrated articulation of Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), "teaches the

tyrants how to be tyrants and their subjects how to behave under tyrants.” The “now” in the title of Trilling’s concluding piece “Tacitus Now” refers to the time of the so-called “Red Scare” in the United States, when a cloud of suspicion and betrayal hung over American political and cultural circles as it had not before. Trilling leaves out any specific references to the Red Scare: the piece’s title thus speaks to the enduring relevance of Tacitus, and serves as a call to continue to read him and work through the uncertainties and contradictions that he presents.

TIMOTHY JOSEPH

*College of the Holy Cross, tjoseph@holycross.edu*