

BOOK REVIEW

Tacitus, Annals, 15.20-23, 33-45. By MATTHEW OWEN and INGO GILDENHARD. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013. Pp. 268. Paperback, £15.95. ISBN 978-1-78374-000-0. (Hardback and various Digital versions are also available)

Affordable for anyone with access to the Internet (including a free printable version), this selection of excerpts from the *Annals* functions well for a college-level course of reading and interpreting Tacitus in Latin. Although the selections focus primarily on a speech by Thrasea Paeta and Nero's excesses (including the fire of Rome), the attention paid to the historical context and subtleties of Tacitus' Latin make this textbook a convenient in-depth look at why the *Annals* are so powerful. There is enough contextual explanation overall to help students appreciate these selections, even though these particular selections were chosen primarily because of the UK college level curriculum requirements. Regardless, the overall approach for this edition has been to produce a very scholarly and thought-provoking textbook available to anyone regardless of cost. The philosophy of Open Book Publishers is part of a movement that is challenging the established publishing order not only in terms of price but in quality of scholarship, as this textbook proves.

The central section of the book contains the selections from the *Annals* in order, followed by the larger, more comprehensive commentary section. In the introduction, Owen and Gildenhard make clear that their pedagogical aims and goals are to understand and appreciate the selected excerpts syntactically and stylistically in the context of the *Annals* and Tacitus' corpus as a whole; in the *Annals'* historical setting and relation to the Roman Principate; and finally in the context of our world. Each Latin chapter text features a facing page of limited running vocabulary, but with no accompanying full glossary, so students will need a Latin dictionary handy.

Each page of Latin text also features a select amount of questions on grammar and syntax as well as others concerning "Stylistic Appreciation" and a concluding "Discussion Point." The following commentary section covers limited grammar and syntax explication balanced with "stylistic and thematic observations, *with a*

special emphasis on how form reinforces, indeed generates, meaning (3, my emphasis). I find that this latter claim is what makes this edition so interesting to teachers and students alike. Even if the accompanying question prompts fail to elicit discussion in the classroom, then these commentary interpretations should. I personally may not agree with all of these interpretations, but they certainly allow for much thought-provoking questions, and will certainly help any student to understand how deeply Tacitus' writing can be read.

A very good example from the early pages of the commentary involves breaking down a Latin sentence in *Annals* 15.20.1 and showing how Tacitus' syntax expresses more about Roman attitudes toward the provincials than is actually stated (83-84). I found that this example went into great depth while also allowing itself to be a model that students could use to apply to later, shorter interpretations of the same sort. Along with these interpretations are a variety of parallel passages embedded in the commentary section, drawing mostly from primary Roman sources (i.e. Suetonius, Quintilianus etc.), as well as from various scholarly articles and books, lending more to the overall effectiveness of this textbook to both the student and teacher.

This engaging edition also combines the standard scholarly language with a feisty colloquial phrasing that is appropriate to the extreme nature of the content. For example, the Introduction covers very well Tacitus' life and career, including parallel timelines of emperors and Tacitus' own life events. In the section "Political System of the Principate," the editors even question Tacitus' judgment of Nero. Tacitus' writings, including a historiography chart and *Annals* chart book by book, details his corpus, while the section on his style also prepares the students for the kind of in-depth reading that they will encounter in the *Annals*. These are all well and good, serving the academic purposes necessary to prepare the groundwork for this reading. Then the editors delve into "Tacitus' Nero-narrative: Rocky-Horror-Picture Show and Broadway on the Tiber," a section which hints at the comments to come when discussing the proclivities and logic(?) of Nero's leadership and effectiveness as an emperor. The juxtaposition of a rational and principled senator like Thrasea Paetus against the excesses and jealousy of Nero is a key theme in these particular selections as well as Tacitus' handling of them. Again, the editors back up their own assertions with the most recent scholarship on Tacitus, which is not only footnoted but also collected *in toto* in the Bibliography section, a worthy resource for all current Tacitus scholars, and one that most likely will be continually updated online.

The last section “Visual Aids” contains two maps, a family tree, and a photo of a remnant of Nero’s Golden House (all B&W, but in color online). With the source of this textbook housed on a website, any of these sections can be augmented, revised, and appended from day to day. Readers are allowed to comment on any paragraph, so the potential for interactive reading across geographical boundaries exists through this portal. This is the first textbook of this kind that I have encountered, and I hope it will not be the last of this caliber.

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