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Writing and Empire in Tacitus [Review]

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mystical is his educational philosophy (2.750–87). You reach the heavens only by learning celestial mechanics step-by-step. God is Reason (the ubiquitous *deus et ratio*), and a man exercising reason is indeed “one with God”; but you do not “encompass God” just by thinking about him or “contemplate” the heavens like a mantra. You do so in the Hermetic corpus.

Volk observed that when Manilius “draws down from Heaven the divine arts” (1.14–15), he uses the language of magic. There, he strips *divinas* of its associations with vulgar fortune-telling. Here, in a *volte-face*, she defends 1.91–94 and its magic from the censure of Dickie and the evidence he marshalled in *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London 2001). Nothing can redeem their content. Necromancy was illegal; haruspicy was discredited Republican chicanery.

Even if 1.91–94 were genuine, they would still damn magic. *Ne vulgata canam* (“not to tell the commonplace,” Goold) has the negative connotation of 1.750 and 3.30: a popular but degrading etiology, like 2.25–38, a popular poem, easy to write and worthless. *Vulgus iners* sets the tone (5.736). The successor of kings and priests tells himself not to discuss such things no matter how popular. Volk’s defence is special pleading: “agriculture, navigation, commerce and warfare . . . are viewed as ambivalent, if not downright nefarious” (248, n. 54). Carried to extremes, they constitute *luxuria*. Volk adduces no examples of anyone calling them *nefas* as such.

But such cavils and caveats are far outweighed by the good. Volk’s *vademecum* deserves a wide readership; *tolle lege*.

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DYLAN SAILOR. *Writing and Empire in Tacitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xii + 359 pp. Cloth, \$99.00.

Over the past decade, scholars such as Ash, O’Gorman, and Haynes have taken up a cause long championed by Woodman, insisting that we must treat Tacitus’ works as literary productions before we can use them as historical documents. By remaining attentive to issues of voice, allusion, and narrative presentation, these scholars have shown how Tacitus is worthy of the kinds of intense readings we might perform on any ancient author writing in poetry or prose; in many ways they do for Tacitus what Miles, Jaeger, and Feldherr did for Livy in the 1990s. Dylan Sailor’s *Writing and Empire in Tacitus* continues the trend. The book is a study of Tacitus’ aims in writing his histories, rather than a historical study of the events he chooses to describe; according to Sailor, Tacitus believes that his historical works compete not only with other written works of history but also with other cultural and political modes of representation, above all those

emanating from the *princeps* himself. As such, the study is especially concerned with those moments when Tacitus is most explicit about his aims as a historian and the purpose of historiography more broadly, such as the prefaces to the *Agricola* and to the *Histories* and the excursus preceding the trial of Cremutius Cordus (*Ann.* 4.32–33). But the book also ranges far beyond these self-reflexive moments, and one of the many merits of the study is Sailor's ability to find evidence for Tacitus' program in unexpected places.

After a brief introduction surveying the book's organization and argument, Sailor's first chapter ("Autonomy, Authority, and Representing the Past under the Principate") acts as an extended overture of the book's main themes. The chapter examines Tacitus' decision to write history in the broader context of the crisis of elite autonomy and authority under the Principate. The consolidation of power inverts older systems of representation and meaning: even the consulship, the pinnacle of traditional power, now becomes the ultimate sign of being the emperor's lackey. Historians, too, are at constant risk of being seen as endorsers or promoters of the emperor's version of history—at risk, therefore, of losing authorship of their own work, according to Sailor. To be an independent author during the Principate one must therefore assert one's distance from the *princeps* himself; indeed, even the assertion of independence can come across as currying favor, as anyone who has read Pliny's *Panegyricus* is well aware. Hence the esteem among the senatorial elite for the political martyrs whose death is the ultimate proof of their independence. Tacitus on the other hand served as consul under Nerva and did rather well under the Flavians, too, even under the hated Domitian. Sailor's contribution is not to read this apparent contradiction as simple hypocrisy on the author's part but rather as the ultimate claim to independence. Martyrs, by killing themselves rather than submitting to the whims of a particular *princeps*, legitimize the system if only by contrast, since the meaning of their actions still depends upon the existence of the *princeps*. Tacitus, on the other hand, attempts to transcend the false dichotomy of obsequiousness or defiance, and his historical writing "has to perform alone the hard task of proving a degree of alienation that is otherwise quite imperceptible in the life he led" (49). The remainder of Sailor's book sets out to explore how Tacitus' historical works establish this sense of isolation.

In his second chapter ("*Agricola* and the Crisis of Representation"), Sailor reads the biography as Tacitus' attempt to outdo Domitian in a contest of representation. The imperial family's monopoly on glory was not only an assertion of power but also an assertion of meaning: under tyrants such as Domitian, deeds that would traditionally merit glory attract negative or invidious attention from the emperor. By emphasizing the topsy-turvy system of representation that applied during Domitian's reign in particular, Tacitus clears space for his own work, which can restore the normal order of things. Sailor is clearly interested in "representation" in the broadest sense of the word: even Domitian's reaction to *Agricola*'s return home from Britain qualifies as an act of representation on the emperor's part. Skeptical readers may well wonder whether Tacitus himself

would have seen his writings as parallel in some way to his father-in-law's modest deportment or to Domitian's haughty facial expressions, yet Sailor is quite persuasive in teasing out the ways in which the historian argues for the connection. After Agricola reconquers the island of Anglesey, for example, he insists that it not be considered a *victoria* to conquer what should never have been lost (*Agr.* 18.6); his modesty is clearly read by his contemporaries as a commentary on the meaninglessness of words such as victory during the Principate. Thus Tacitus' biography is not just about giving his forgotten father-in-law the eulogy that is owed to him, or about restoring the system of elite glory more generally, but about restoring the proper meaning of things. Sailor does not ignore the reality that this effort surely played well under Trajan's ideology of restoration. Yet Sailor turns Tacitus into a defender of something bigger than any one emperor: the Roman imperial project, which needs figures like Agricola and Tacitus himself to survive and prosper, no matter what individual *principes* might think.

The next two chapters focus on the *Histories*, specifically on the preface (chapter 3, "The Burdens of *Histories*") and the civil war narrative (chapter 4, "Elsewhere than Rome"). If the *Agricola* gave Tacitus an opportunity to participate in the damnation of Domitian's memory, choosing to start a work with the tumultuous events of 69 and the subsequent rise of the Flavian dynasty will force him to address the institution of the Principate more directly. So, too, will the fading memory of Domitian's tyranny. Instead of the *Agricola's* emphasis on the hostility of Domitian to true historiography, the preface now insists on the hostility of the Principate as an institution to the writing of history. As Sailor points out, Latin *res gestae* implies an agent, and when that agent changed from the Roman people to one man (as Tacitus puts it), the *princeps* asserted ownership over history itself. Tacitus attempts to clear space for himself by exposing all previous histories written since Actium as inspired either by flattery or *malignitas* (a precursor to his more famous *sine ira et studio* remark at *Ann.* 1.1). In Sailor's view, Tacitus sees these two reactions as opposites, to be sure, but deceptively so, for both buy into the power dynamic of the Principate, even if hostile historians are emphasizing their hatred of one particular emperor. The key to Sailor's interpretation is a form of exchange theory: while flatterers are obviously seeking rewards for their praise, maligners are less obviously seeking rewards from their contemporaries, i.e., other elites hostile to the emperor in question. Tacitus draws our attention to these alternatives to assert his own interest in a different audience: posterity. In essence, Sailor argues, Tacitus' burden in his preface is to show how his historiography asserts his independence from the Principate by operating, in a sense, outside it. It is a strong reading, and mostly persuasive, save for the somewhat extraneous final part of the chapter, where Sailor points out some parallels for this kind of self-removal from Roman society (such as the Stoic *sapiens* and the slave at Saturnalia).

More persuasive is his turn to the remainder of the *Histories*, especially the civil war narratives in Book 1 and the destruction of the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline in Book 3. As he did in his analysis of the preface, Sailor here argues

that Tacitus' portrayal of the civil war clears way for his own text to serve as a rival to the imperial mode of representation. The backdrop for Sailor's discussion, as it is for Tacitus, is the city itself. As the imperial family stakes its exclusive claim to the traditional forms of euergetism once shared by competitive Roman elites, the appearance and function of Rome itself becomes subject to the approval (or the whims) of the *princeps* rather than a broader elite. Rome, in other words, had already been "repurposed" before the events of 69 exposed "the secret of empire," as Tacitus famously puts it, "that a *princeps* could be made elsewhere than Rome" (*Hist.* 1.4). What, then, is Rome for? In the civil war, principally for fighting. Sailor cleverly shows how Tacitus' war narratives dramatize the "elsewhere than Rome" formula in a different sense, as Rome becomes an anti-Rome: the Capitol is destroyed, and soldiers rush past civic monuments intent on slaughter—hardly the usual relationship between pedestrian and monument. Into this crisis of signification steps Tacitus himself, whose literary "monument" alone can restore the proper order of things, even surpassing the Flavian effort to assert legitimacy by emphasizing the "anti-Romes" on the outskirts of the empire (Civilis in Gaul; the Jews). According to Sailor, Tacitus buys into and promotes such Flavian propaganda, yet also leaves open the more sinister reading that the Flavian conquests were not only Roman conquests but also literally *Flavian* conquests: what the Roman army had done to the Jews, the Flavian army had done to rival elite factions in Rome. Tacitus exposes the tension that these wars (and now all wars) fought in the name of *imperium Romanum* are also fought in the name of individual *principes* and their families.

The fifth and final chapter ("Tacitus and Cremutius") examines Tacitus' description of the trial of Cremutius Cordus at *Ann.* 4.32–38. Cremutius, a historian condemned to death for his outspoken history of the late Republic, has often been read as a figure for Tacitus, an association encouraged by Tacitus' long self-reflective excursus on the function of his *Annales* which precedes the story. Tacitus promotes the idea that his work will be met with the kind of imperial hostility that Cremutius faced, but should we believe him? Sailor argues that Tacitus' claims should not be taken at face value. After all, by asserting the likeness between himself and Cremutius, Tacitus not only manages to sidestep the more obvious accusation (that the *princeps* will approve of his history) but also fights against an even bigger threat: that his history will be ignored altogether. By trying to convince his readers that his book is dangerous and needs protection, Tacitus above all wants to convince them that his work is *topical*, hardly an obvious conclusion considering how long ago Tiberius had ruled. Sailor perceptively argues that contemporary readers preferred more recent history, so that Tacitus' claims to relevance are a form of presentism: Tacitus is trying to convince his readers that this Tiberius fellow is not as ancient (read: irrelevant) as they might think. To do so, he sets the bar comically low for dangerous topicality: to write about virtuous people in the past, he suggests, might offend the vice-filled people who wield power in the present. If it seems at times that Sailor is trying to have it both ways—Tacitus is both an insider and an outsider, Tacitus is both hostile to

and a friend of the Principate—it is only because he believes that Tacitus himself is trying to have it both ways.

On the whole, the book is well written and well argued. And it will be of use not only to lovers of Tacitus (who will want to scour the index for Sailor's often brilliant close readings of many episodes not discussed here) but also to literary scholars and cultural historians more broadly, who will enjoy his excursions on unexpected topics such as the declamatory tradition surrounding Cicero's hypothetical decision whether to burn his writings. Yet this same expansive range is also a weakness. More than one of the chapters is over sixty-five pages long, and even the subsections of chapters receive (and require) their own summaries. And while the analysis is invariably perceptive, the prose is at times rather dense, even occasionally obfuscating (e.g., "through Otho's rhetoric, the fabric of the city comes to seem to carry meaning only to the degree it is treated as doing so," 192). But these are largely matters of style, not substance. Readers who are eager to see how Tacitus situates himself within (and extricates himself from) imperial modes of representation will learn a great deal from this book, which exhibits the insight and intensity that so many of us admire in Tacitus himself.

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