

VICTORIA EMMA PAGÁN, *Tacitus*. Understanding Classics. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017, xiv+193 pp., \$20.00 (pb), ISBN 978-1-78076-318-7.

This compact, refreshing, and ambitious study is an accomplished addition to the growing 'stable' of volumes in the *Understanding Classics* series (now comprising 20 books). This specially commissioned and ambitious series, edited by Richard Stoneman (who has himself contributed an earlier volume on Pindar), aims to introduce outstanding Greek and Roman authors and thinkers of antiquity to modern readers and to examine these authors' wider historical and cultural significance, including their later reception in European literature, art, music, and culture.

These formidable general criteria for a small book would be a daunting prospect for any scholar commissioned to produce the volume on Tacitus for the *Understanding Classics* series. After all, this Roman writer is difficult to illuminate with meaningful generalisations; lived through some extraordinarily dramatic and complex times; operated in multiple genres (each with its own distinctive traditions and predecessors); produced historical works populated by a huge cast of characters; and experienced a historiographical afterlife which was by any standards exceptionally rich and wide-reaching. Not only that, but it is inevitably challenging to write an introductory volume for readers without Latin about an author whose historical significance is so intimately bound up in the resonances of his taut and expressive Latin. Yet Pagán (henceforth P.) has handled this difficult task very well, resisting the urge to oversimplify her picture of Tacitus and instead creating a collaborative relationship with her readers, as they progressively deepen their understanding and appreciation of the Tacitean *corpus* over the course of the book.

This is a volume which ranges incredibly widely in space and time. Within the first three pages alone, we enter a virtual 'courtroom' as we see consumers of Tacitus passing judgement on the author, moving from the polarised opening assessments of Tacitus by the Scottish barrister Thomas Gordon (appreciative) in 1728 and Reverend Thomas Hunter (hostile) in 1752; then we fly briskly back to Tacitus' birth, before pushing forwards to the low profile of his works in late antiquity and the Middle Ages and to his resurgence in the 16th century and beyond – and quickly moving all the way to his significant impact on the postwar German artist Anselm Kiefer and the American poet Frank Bidart. This kaleidoscopic opening is quite a good foretaste of what is to come in the body of this diverse book. It is also an engaging touch that the two Thomases (appreciative Gordon and hostile

Hunter) pop up regularly in the body of the book offering their views, rather like a Greek chorus.

The basic structure of the book is as follows: after (i) acknowledgements, (ii) a list of emperors from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, (iii) a list of figures (the family of Augustus; the family of Vipsania; an outline of the contents of the *Dialogue on Orators*) and (iv) abbreviations, we have six chapters (1. 'Prefacing a Life'; 2. 'Nobles and Nobodies'; 3. 'Words and Deeds'; 4. 'Romans and Others'; 5. 'Then and Now'; 6. 'Yesterday and Today'), and finally, the notes, bibliography, and index. Tacitus' Latin is translated throughout (but generally not provided). P. still tries to convey the impact and nuance of Tacitus' Latin style, despite the difficulties in so doing in this setting: e.g. on p.18 when discussing a sentence from *Histories* 1.1.3. This is an instance where the Latin could usefully have been provided – even readers without Latin might gain something, as when the resonant Latin word *sesquiplaga* (*Annals* 15.67.4), a *hapax legomenon*, is quoted productively (p.45).

The first chapter crisply sets the scene, bringing in the basic biographical information about Tacitus and his times which enhances our appreciation of his work. P. then turns to the individual prefaces of his five works, except the *Germania* which has no formal preface – but which is nonetheless an illuminating work because of its direct rivalry with Julius Caesar's *de Bello Gallico*.

P. here perhaps underplays this Tacitean literary *aemulatio* (p.5, pp.12-13), although she later offers some constructive engagement with this very issue (p.84). Clear and helpful summaries follow of the topics to be covered in the next five chapters. P. sometimes comes across as being a little anxious when providing basic but crucial details, e.g. about Tacitus' own life: 'So why begin with the life of our author, Cornelius Tacitus?' (p.6), as if such material might seem too conventional for a cutting edge series. Yet P. should not worry: introductory volumes simply need to incorporate and illuminate such fundamental material for their readers, many of whom may have very little previous knowledge of the author's biography and are thus likely to find it intriguing in its own right.

The second chapter ('Nobles and Nobodies'), focuses on some of the many individuals ('approximately 1,000', p.27) who appear in the surviving books of the *Histories* and *Annals*. There is some interesting discussion of some of these historical individuals in the early part of this chapter (e.g. Tiberius' first wife, Vipsania). The pace does move very quickly before entering the gentler terrain of 'stock characters' (p.38). It may be that readers new to Tacitus (and to the early imperial period) might find the early part of this chapter quite challenging. For the linear reader, it might arguably have been better placed a little later in the volume.

In chapter three, 'Words and Deeds', P. explains the main differences between ancient and modern historiography before clarifying how Tacitus

deploys *inventio*, the imaginative reconstruction of historical events. P. sets out to illuminate his different ‘methods of storytelling’ (p.54) because ‘in the end, how Tacitus writes history leads inevitably to why he writes history’ (p.54). In this chapter P. constructively uses short passages of Tacitus’ narrative to trace the complex and shifting focalisation in play, (e.g.) at *Histories* 1.12.1-3, when the revolt of the legions in Upper Germany is communicated to Galba. These little case-studies are helpful, particularly since P. initially introduces sections of narrative which are not obviously ‘purple passages’, thus helping her readers to get a sense of Tacitus’ narrative techniques in contexts where he is not pulling out all the stops.

In chapter four (‘Romans and Others’), P. takes us into the colourful world of Tacitean ethnography via the *Germania*, an ‘anomaly’ in the *corpus* and therefore (P. suggests) ‘the most important work for understanding Tacitus’ (p.78). Tacitus’ memorable focus at the end of the monograph on the hybrid Hellusii and Oxiones, those strange creatures with human faces and the bodies of beasts, is seen as a synecdoche for his wider concerns throughout all his works about the erosion of Roman identity. P. constructively aligns this memorable image of hybridity at the end of the *Germania* with Arminius, who was both a Cheruscan freedom fighter and a citizen with equestrian status, and later with Julius Civilis (p.92). She also productively explores the relationship between this text and Virgil’s *Georgics*, particularly his praise of Italy (*Georgics* 2.136-76), to draw out the ‘dynamic interplay between criticism and praise that drives the *Germania*’ (p.88). This highly readable chapter, with a reach extending far beyond the *Germania*, offers a wealth of illuminating comment on Tacitus’ narrative techniques.

P. moves in chapter five (‘Then and Now’) to the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, offering a close reading of this work through its three main interlocutors, Maternus, Aper, and Messalla. P. then turns her spotlight onto thematic correspondences between the *Dialogus* and the start of *Annals* 13, particularly the eulogy which Nero delivered at Claudius’ funeral in AD54 – where Tacitus replays in a curious new setting many of the themes which loomed large in the *Dialogus* (‘the comparison of past to present, the decline of oratory, the periodization of the genre, and the influence of politics on the art of persuasion’, p.124).

In the final chapter six (‘Yesterday and Today’), P. turns to the reception of Tacitus in later eras as an author who ‘captivated the imagination precisely because he defied labels’ (p.132). After a brief excursus on the epic film *Quo Vadis*, she first presents the scattered ancient references to Tacitus from his publication until his rediscovery in the fourteenth century. That was the pivotal moment in 1360 when Boccaccio brought an eleventh-century manuscript (the second Medicean) containing *Annals* 11-16 and *Histories* 1-5 from Monte Cassino to Florence, which in the next century enabled the first printed editions of Tacitus (and eventually led to the ‘reunion’

with *Annals* 1-6, preserved in the first Medicean, and published by Filippo Beroaldo in 1515). P.'s consideration of the manuscripts also includes the extraordinary and infamous story of the Codex Aesinas (containing amongst other things the *Germania*), so alluring to the Nazi regime, which various scholars (particularly Christopher Krebs) have examined in more detail. In the rest of the chapter, P. sheds light on Tacitus' influence on political theory from the Italian renaissance to the nineteenth century and then turns to his impact on scholars and novelists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, culminating in a more detailed consideration of a play (Petrus van Wyk Louw's *Germanicus*, 1956), a painting (Anselm Kiefer's *Varus*, 1976), and a poem (Frank Bidart's 'The Return', 1997) inspired by Tacitus' narrative of the campaigns of Germanicus in *Annals* 1 and 2, as well as a song (Scott Ordway's 'North Woods', a minimalist a cappella piece adapting sentences selected from the *Agricola* and *Germania* and transposing them to Maine, 2016). This chapter offers some real gems, including the detail that in 1996, Tacitus' version of Arminius' ambush of Varus was turned into a satirical camp film *Die Hermannsschlacht*, played in Latin with German subtitles; and that in 2005 the Royal Shakespeare Company revived Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), in which Shakespeare himself had originally played Tiberius.

Despite the book's obvious strengths, there are some issues of presentation which could have been improved. So I question whether relegating all the detailed citations to Tacitus' texts to endnotes is helpful. This layout leads to an increasingly annoying experience of constantly flicking back and forth from the main text to the end of the book, only to find an unadorned reference to the ancient text which could so easily have been incorporated in the main text. So for example in chapter four, c.55 out of 95 notes took this form. This may be series style, but if so, it does not enhance the reading experience.

Also, it is odd for a book in a series which expressly aims to engage with the reception of ancient authors in the sphere of art not to have any visual representations of paintings. This doubtless reflects the publisher's decision to make the book affordable in an era when images can be tracked down pretty easily on the internet. Nonetheless, it can still be engaging to have a flavour of what is out there by reproducing a painting on the book's cover. In this case, the uniform series style also prevented this. The brown-and-black cover design (brown background and black head profile representing Tacitus) is a little uninspiring, even within the established austere format of the other covers in the series: sample images from the series are available at www.simonlevyassociates.co.uk. In addition, unusually the choice of a black figure for Tacitus has interpretative resonances because colours have an interpretative weight in his reception. So, in a study of Machiavelli from 1921 (*Machiavelli e il tacitismo*), Giuseppe Toffanin contrasted an anti-

tyrannical 'Red Tacitus' and a monarchical 'Black Tacitus'. The book's cover was obviously not intended to reflect or engage with this critique expressed in shorthand through colours, but P. does discuss it directly (p.131).

Thirdly, although P. is generally very sensitive to the needs of her readership and carefully explains terms, there are a few items which have escaped her usually meticulous eye, such as 'cognatic succession' (p. 9) and 'prosopography' (p. 28, 42); and is 'furlough' (p. 43) likely to be understood by all readers? Finally, in the notes, the citation style of modern scholars generally follows a pattern of first name, middle initial, and surname, but this does cause some confusing oddities to those who know the scholarship ('Timothy P. Wiseman' [p. 162, n.4] is referred to as 'Peter Wiseman' in the main text [p. 30], although he generally publishes as T.P. Wiseman; similarly, J.B. Hainsworth becomes 'John B. Hainsworth', p. 146; 'Elisabeth Walker Henry' [p. 38] becomes 'Elisabeth Henry (Bessie) Walker' [p. 163, n. 30], although in practice she published first as B. Walker and then as E. Henry, but never, as far as I know, as E. Walker Henry), and the rigid system even generates the occasional mistake (Simon Malloch becomes 'Stephen J.V. Malloch' [p. 165, n. 38]).

Nonetheless, these are quibbles. P. generally peppers her narrative of Tacitus with engaging and vivid details which draw readers into her lively analysis. So, the quotation from Emily Dickinson ('There is no frigate like a book / To take us lands away', p. 5), who led a relatively cloistered life, is well chosen to illustrate the broad concept that knowing something about an author's biography can enhance our appreciation of certain moments in their texts. P. is also capable of engaging stylistic flourishes such as the reference to Augustus, 'who suffered the worst fate to befall any potentate: he had no sons' (p. 28), or when she puts ancient accounts of the Varian disaster into perspective: 'However, when compared to the sack of Rome by the Gauls or the invasion of the peninsula by Hannibal, the loss of three legions in a swamp nearly a thousand miles from Rome seems rather small' (p. 97). P. can also introduce some memorable imagery such as when she uses Tacitus' account of the production of amber as a metaphor for Roman imperialism: 'As the insects are lured and captured by the resin, so the tribes of Germani are lured by the price and eventually trapped into supplying a commodity for the Roman luxury market' (p. 80). She also includes moments of illuminating *synkrisis* using material from other eras such as when she contrasts (p. 41) Britannicus' direct song stirring *miseratio* for his plight (Tacitus *Annals* 13.15) with Hamlet staging the (allegorical) 'Murder of Gonzago' to expose his uncle's plot. Finally, she has an eye for memorable linguistic details such as the etymology of 'quip' from *quippe* (p. 166, n. 71) or Pope Pius II having an honorific papal name (Pius) which complements his own name, Enea (i.e. Aeneas) Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini (p. 139).

Generally, this is a very enjoyable and thought-provoking study which

achieves a great deal within its relatively compact format. Overall, the 'minor works' receive a greater share of attention than the *Histories* and *Annals*, but the chapters still shed valuable light on Tacitus' concerns and motivations as a historian. P.'s refreshing decision to resist organising her five main chapters by focusing on Tacitus' five individual works is innovative for an introductory study of this sort. The end result is a stimulating synthesis of Tacitus' writings which will have much to offer to specialists and general readers alike.

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