

A.J. Woodman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. Xvi, 366 ISBN (Paperback) 978-0-521-69748-4. \$32.99

Anyone looking at the output of academic presses in the last few years might conclude that ‘there’s no business like companion business’. Certainly an author as fundamental to the study of Roman history and historiography as Tacitus merits a companion and there could be no better Tacitean scholar to shape and edit such a work than Tony Woodman. The nineteen contributors comprise a transatlantic mix that reflects to some degree the career of Woodman himself: a senior generation of scholars based in the old world, such as A.R. Birley, M.T. Griffin, R.H. Martin and younger scholars based in the USA, such as C.S. Kraus, D.S. Levene and C.B. Krebs. What they have produced is an excellent volume that can serve as an introduction to Tacitus for university students, particularly for those who have a little Latin, although most contributions are accessible to the Latin-less, and will also cause those well-acquainted with Tacitus to think again.

After an introduction by the editor the collection falls into four parts: i) *Contexts*, ii) *Texts*, iii) *Topics* and iv) *Transmission*.

Woodman’s introduction restates the case that Tacitus was a reader of Velleius Paterculus and Virgil and thereby establishes a complex intertextuality with two authors that will have been repeated for many other authors whose works have not survived. By contrast he plays down any use of the *acta senatus* by Tacitus, although the *senatus consultum de Pisone patre* gives pause for thought. As one whose readings of Tacitus have consistently demonstrated the subtlety of his language, Woodman laments the declining numbers of those who can read him in the original and appreciate the supreme ancient historian and unique Latinist.

Gowing begins the contextualising of Tacitus with the observation that, while Tacitus sometimes tells us the sources of his information, he never reveals who influenced him. Sallust and Livy, very different in style, scale and conception of genre, prove to be the most obvious candidates and Tacitus achieves a successful combination of their respective merits (24). On the lost historians of the early Principate only guesswork is possible, but Gowing prefers to see Cluvius Rufus as a writer of *chronique scandaleuse* rather than as a major annalistic historian.<sup>1</sup>

Woodman discusses the publication dates of Tacitus’ various works, arguing that Pliny’s letters to Tacitus in Book I reveal that work on the *Dialogus* was in progress and suggesting that Tacitus’ information on the *maiestas* trial of Granius Marcellus may derive from Pliny who had become the owner of Granius’ villa. Tacitus’ stubborn silence on Trajan’s Parthian campaigns intrigues, as he probably played a role in the preparations while serving as proconsul of Asia in AD 112/3.

*Texts* provides seven surveys of Tacitus’ works, with three chapters devoted to the three hexads of the *Annals*. Tony Birley’s study of the *Agricola* reveals a heroic commander with the traditional qualities of Cato who rivalled the achievements of Alexander in reaching the end of the world, a student from Massilia who eventually

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<sup>1</sup> For the opposite case, see D. Wardle, ‘Cluvius Rufus and Suetonius’, *Hermes* 120 (1992), 466–82.

surpassed Pytheas, and a biographer who suppressed the achievements of Vettius Bolanus to glorify his subject. Richard Thomas emphasises the combination of genres within the *Germania*: a conventional ethnographic *logos* followed by a catalogue redolent of didactic and epic poetry enclosing historical digressions and containing requisite *thaumata*. Ultimately it remains a work whose purpose is obscure. Sander Goldberg looks at the *Dialogus* as a study of the change in oratory under the principate rather than its decline, questioning whether Tacitus is ‘necessarily the gloomy ironist of the historical writings’ (79).

Rhiannon Ash looks at the surviving books of the *Historiae* as revealing the progression from fission to incipient fusion as civil war was followed by the Flavian dynasty; the years of civil war are narrated at disproportionate length, perhaps because Nerva’s reign had recently offered Tacitus and his readers the clear possibility of a similar scenario. Tacitus emphasises forcefully the responsibility of all the soldiery in the carnage and chaos of 69 and with the motif of *metus hostilis* in Books IV and V prepares the reader for the new unity developed under the Flavians.

Christina Kraus shows how Tacitus’ choice to begin his *Annals* in AD 14 enables him to highlight the dynastic nature of the imperial regime, a feature further underlined by the constant use of terms of family relations for the imperial protagonists. Tiberius is frequently undermined by the technique of *comparatio deterior* with Augustus, Germanicus is an ambiguous and doomed figure, Agrippina, ‘a kind of hypostasised womb’ (113). Simon Malloch’s study of the exiguous remains of the second hexad shows how Tacitus enforces his picture of Claudius as passive and submissive by displacing him from the centre of the narrative so that he becomes a character in other people’s stories. A looser annalistic framework also permits the creation of extended narratives of foreign affairs that again marginalise Claudius. Had we the whole of Claudius’ reign would a different picture emerge? Elizabeth Keitel examines Tacitus’ presentations of deaths to highlight differences (and some similarities) between Nero and his victims.

*Topics* in general broadens the focus from individual works of Tacitus to look at how the historian should be read and how he grapples with major issues. Oddly perhaps, given that Woodman is the editor, there is no contribution that acknowledges the powerfully argued position of Woodman and T. P. Wiseman on the nature of ancient historiography as essentially rhetorical and the role of *inventio*. Christopher Pelling investigates the identification of Tacitus’ voice-print which is to be extracted not just from the obvious uses of the first person. When Tacitus uses ‘we’ or generic second-person verbs he is making the reader complicit in his point-of-view, building credibility and nurturing scepticism in turn, often through the technique of shared incredulity. Miriam Griffin begins by demonstrating that Tacitus follows no one coherent theory or philosophy of history in presenting variously the role of fate, destiny and chance and suggests that mood is more important than analysis. Tacitus also provides no cutting-edge political analysis or nuanced history of legislation, but his singular contribution is to understand the character of the ruler and how to survive under a system that was fundamentally and inescapably hypocritical. Stephen Oakley looks at freedom under the ‘Faustian pact’ (184) between senators and emperors. Although Tacitus’ attitudes were shaped by his

experience of the Domitianic tyranny, his concern for *libertas* is nuanced: senatorial servility is bad, but *libertas* had to be displayed for good purposes to be laudable, and the contumacious opponents of imperial government are ambiguous heroes at best. Oakley's second contribution on style and language highlights Tacitus' exceptional refining of his vocabulary seen in archaisms, poetic colouring and vivid metaphor, the influence of Sallust on the structure of his sentences and of declamation on the development of the pointed style. A comparison of Suetonius and Tacitus on the end of Vitellius points up the difference in genre, e.g. the choice of detail appropriate to history, but the view that 'Suetonius' narrative voice achieves its effects by a dispassionate gaze' (210) is misleading. David Levene's first paper on speeches in the *Histories* shows how set-piece speeches play a lesser role in Tacitus than in other historians but that the greater prominence of other kinds of speech, private, informal etc reflects the new power structure of the principate. By presenting a formal speech in an unusual context, such as that by Galba on the adoption of Piso, Tacitus subtly explores the change in political realities and Galba's failure to appreciate the new situation. Further excellent analysis makes this chapter a highlight of the companion. Levene's second contribution, on warfare in the *Annals*, starts from the critical passage *Annals* 4.32–3 where Tacitus appears to lament the lack of opportunity for traditional military narrative. Levene argues that the sheer one-sidedness of the conflicts in which Rome was involved robbed the writer of the opportunity for exciting narrative, hence the campaigns of Corbulo appear to be more about the avoidance of battle. Only the German campaigns of *Annals* 1 and 2 get an old-fashioned treatment, because Germanicus was 'out of his time: a Republican hero anachronistically marooned in the Principate' (233).

*Transmission* I shall deal with more briefly, as it will be the part of the work least consulted by the average reader, though not because the contributions are below par. R. H. Martin surveys succinctly and lucidly the manuscript tradition and early printed editions down to Lipsius. Alexandra Gajda examines the way Tacitus was read from c. 1530 to the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century in several European countries: Lipsius again is prominent and offers a fascinating case-study of how very different uses of Tacitus could be made as political circumstances changed. Paul Cartledge looks at Edward Gibbon, who proclaimed a devotion to Tacitus that is manifest not in linguistic style, but in his 'whole intellectual style' (276). Christopher Krebs' fascinating survey of the uses to which *Germania* was put from the 15<sup>th</sup> century through to the National Socialists of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany should whet the reader's appetite for his full length work that covers the same material.<sup>2</sup> Martha Malamud looks at the novels of Robert Graves, Naomi Mitchison and Lion Feuchtwanger which draw in different ways on the inspiration of Tacitus' imperial narrative. Mark Toher ends the companion with a study of Sir Ronald Syme, whose intellectual career started with *Quellenkritik* of the *Germania* and reached its peak in the magisterial *Tacitus*. Syme conjured up a Tacitus who was as much a colonial outsider as he himself was and himself became more tacitean in his writing style as his career progressed.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus' Germania from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York, 2011)

This companion will find a worthy place in the library of every institution where Tacitus is taught, even in translation. Tony Woodman has done great service in bringing together a companion that makes even those who know their Tacitus well think again and appreciate a host of illuminating insights.

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