

FORMS OF IDEOLOGY IN TACITUS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE PANEL¹

In recent years, scholars working on historiography (whom I shall call ‘historiographers’ for the sake of brevity) have come under renewed fire for their focus on the literary features of ancient historical texts. Such focus, it is argued, leads historiographers to marginalise or entirely overlook questions of truth in history, even to suggest that the ancient historians were not concerned about the truth of their representations. The emphasis on the poetics of historical representation is seen by some as the abandonment of strong historical interpretation in favour of weak literary criticism. In particular, historiographers who focus on the ambivalence or plurality of meanings in literary text are seen as introducing a dangerous and wilful arbitrariness to the act of reading by claiming that any statement in a historical work can mean ‘absolutely anything’.²

Some of these claims reflect broader misunderstandings of contemporary critical projects: it is fairly common, for instance, for arguments which challenge assumptions about straightforward correlations of words to things to be taken as denial of meaning *tout court*. But to say ‘this word has more than one meaning’ is not the same as saying ‘this word can mean absolutely anything’. The literary historiographer often emphasises the non-straightforward correlation of words and things—such as *virtus*, *imperium*, *numina*—in historical texts, not in order to argue that the historical text can be made to say whatever the reader wants, but to illuminate the complexity and difficulty of speaking about things.³ The requirement to speak about things is the historian’s main task, producing the *res gestae*; this is often referred to as a ‘constraint’ upon the historian’s capacity or desire for literary invention,⁴ and it is this constraint which historiographers are reproached for ignoring.

Historiographers may not agree on the extent to which historians of antiquity were bound to the truth, but many might respond that their focus on literary invention rather than the constraints of veracity is a matter of emphasis.

¹ I am very grateful to the panel contributors, Louis Autin, Olivier Devillers, Holly Haynes and Dylan Sailor for their comments on this introduction, and also to my colleague Robert Fowler for his insightful reading.

² Here I broadly summarise Bosworth (2003), Lendon (2009), though not every position cited above is taken up by each one of these. Equally, there is no unified position among historiographers on these arguments, but rather a spectrum of attitudes.

³ In this respect, Levick’s (2012) exploration of ‘the struggle for truth’ is one of the most exemplary historically informed analyses of the historical text.

⁴ Lendon (2009) 55; Damon (2010) 440–1.

Rather than restating the specific ways in which these texts are to be interpreted in relation to concrete events in the past, historiographers concentrate instead on the *ways* in which these events are represented, shaped, thematised and embellished. In order to do this, they call upon different theoretical frameworks for interpreting how texts evoke other literary texts, how different points of view are embedded in narrative representation, and what assumptions about the author’s world are encoded in his metaphorical language. Analyses of this sort, I will go on to argue, yield interpretations which contribute to historical understanding, but first I want to explore briefly the different modes of reading assumed—and perhaps even practised—in the debate between historians and historiographers.

It is generally agreed that the historical narrative is made up of two elements, variously characterised as *res* and *exaedificatio*, history and rhetoric, subject-matter and style, ‘hard core’ and ‘elaboration’.⁵ Debate continues, however, on how separable these elements are, with many historiographers since Woodman maintaining that rhetorical elaboration in some way plays an important role in the configuration of historical truth. In opposition to this, some historians insist that rhetorical elaboration is easily separated from the ‘hard core’ of history, and some have even gone so far as to postulate a standard practice for ancient (and well-behaved modern) readers: ‘Rhetorical elaboration... is anyway possible without doing violence to the basic facts of the story, by adding the speeches and moral reflections and purple passages which ancient readers were, and modern readers are, well able to discount.’⁶ The suggestion that ancient historians inserted literary material into their accounts in the expectation that their readers would remove and discard these very elements seems extraordinary. As Cynthia Damon cogently remarks, ‘what reader wants to discard this or any of the fruits of the union of rhetoric and historiography?’⁷

We do, however, find evidence in ancient accounts of reading that some elements of the text were considered to be detachable. The Elder Seneca’s *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* represent selections of such portable ornaments from oratory—but for preservation, not discounting.⁸ As Tacitus’ Aper tells us, *iam vero iuvenes ... qui profectus sui causa oratores sectantur, non solum audire, sed etiam referre domum aliquid inlustre et dignum memoria volunt ... sive sensus aliquis arguta et brevi sententia effulsit, sive locus exquisito et poetico cultu enituit* (*Dial.* 20.4)—rhetorical elaboration here is valued aesthetically above all. When Seneca similarly excerpts

⁵ Taken from discussions of Cicero *de Oratore* 2.51–64, the locus for these debates since Woodman (1988).

⁶ Lendon (2009) 44.

⁷ Damon (2010) 450.

⁸ The survival of the speeches and letters from Sallust’s *Histories* is owed to such practice.

from history, in his comparison of the different treatments of Cicero's death, he suggests, through the proverbial figure of the honey-smearing medicine-glass, that the aesthetic appeal of these excerpts may entice his sons from declamation to history. But his immediately preceding characterisation of these same excerpts as *sententiis solidis et verum habentibus* ***⁹ indicates something more. Seneca, in short, does not exemplify an ancient practice of 'discounting' purple passages in history, and his overall assessment of their qualities does not foreclose on their substantive relation to the texts in which they appear, and to which they give shape.

The study of historiography without removing and discounting rhetorical elaboration, I would argue, is a worthwhile practice because it produces a form of historical understanding, which we arrive at by using the methodologies of literary analysis. Historical understanding and literary analysis are here bound together because many of the insights yielded through this mode of reading illuminate the workings of ideology, which is both an historical force and a poetics of lived experience. Ideology has real, concrete effects in the world, as we know from our contemporary experience of societies partly created by ancestors who lived the belief in, for instance, the inferiority of other races. Ideology is also a poetics in that it is fictive—there is no objectively inferior race of humanity, and yet people live their lives as if there were, produce representations formally and informally which uphold, embed and develop this ideology. Ideology, therefore, informs action through a process which is often deeply internalised to historical agents, to the extent that it appears both natural and true. We might consider, for instance, how Tacitus' comments on senatorial *libertas* do not lead him to imagine *libertas* for the subject peoples of the Roman empire.¹⁰

To apprehend the historical truth of any culture at any time, we need to be able to work with ideology's double nature and multiple operations as concrete *and* fictive—in Holly Haynes' memorable formulation, as 'make-believe'. Language plays a crucial role in ideology's workings, and in its critique and exposure; the subtlety of ideological formations requires careful literary analysis to uncover the work they perform. A common error in contemporary thought is to imagine ideology's formulations as crude, an assumption which enables the continued insidious operation of an ideology (such as neo-patriarchy) within a culture where it is formally decried (such as in the modern university).

⁹ The object of *habentibus* is missing.

¹⁰ Sailor (2012) 37; Woodman (2014) 217.

Tacitus is the Roman historian who most exemplifies the complexity of ideology and its analysis, as his narratives both probe and propagate the overlapping ideologies of Principate and senatorial elite, City and Empire abroad.¹¹ Tacitean irony represents ideological belief and its exposure in one, economically dense formulation; as Holly Haynes remarks, ‘he reproduces what people are not even aware they are saying’.¹² The historiographer needs to adopt the same approach to Tacitus himself: rather than confining ourselves to what we can ascertain as the intention of the historian, we can gain considerable insight into the author’s commitments to both politics and history through attentiveness to the assumptions which his choice of language conveys. John B. Thompson encapsulates the issues perfectly: ‘The terms of a discourse may carry out their ideological role by explicitly referring to one thing and implicitly referring to another, by entangling these multiple referents in a way which serves to sustain relations of domination. Hence the importance of metaphor, of metonymy, of ambiguity: of creative turns of phrase which slide from one object to another or condense several referents into one.’¹³ As Thompson goes on to explain, interpretation requires us to disentangle and reconstitute these multiple referents, to attempt to understand ancient reality *as* representation: what, and how, the past means to historical agents and historians.

A conversation about these issues began among a group of Tacitus scholars at the Celtic Classic Conference in 2013;¹⁴ the conversation continued at the Classical Association Conference in 2015, where four speakers investigated how Tacitus explores the dimensions of ideology through various literary modes. Through the careful analysis of narrative features, such as reported discourse (Autin), intertextuality (Sailor), and embedded pasts (Devillers), the layers of subjectivity emerge, through which Tacitus represents and/or critiques what the past means to its various actors as well as to himself. Subjective experience of the past is mediated through memory (Devillers, Sailor), knowledge (Autin) and desire (Haynes): these various modes by which the agent orients his position in his world, and shapes his actions. Finally, these forms of ideology also inform Tacitus’ perspective on history in practice:¹⁵ as his text evokes the past through subjective, meta-literary and narrative systems

¹¹ Raaflaub (2010).

¹² Haynes (2012) 288.

¹³ Thompson (1984) 200. The same observation can be made of the latent ideology in contemporary scholarship: Lendon (2009), for instance, utilises metaphors which convey the threat of literary criticism in terms of social panic, and which are alarming in their misanthropy.

¹⁴ The papers of Ash, Cogitore, Devillers, Haynes, Keitel, O’Gorman, Pagán, Sailor in Devillers (2014).

¹⁵ As with genre (on which see Farrell (2003)), history-writing in antiquity is more complex in practice than in theory.

of memory, it provides continuous reflection on the uses and meanings of history.

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