

REVIEW

DISENTANGLING TACITUS

Rhiannon Ash, ed., *Tacitus: Annals Book XV*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 368. Hardback, £75.00/\$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-00978-3. Paperback, £24.99/\$31.99. ISBN 978-0-521-26939-1.

This is a needed work. *Annals* 15 has long been in sore want of a stand-alone commentary: thus it has been sadly neglected on reading lists and in seminars, despite containing such inherently interesting passages as the Fire, the Pisonian conspiracy, the death of Seneca, and one of the earliest mentions of Christianity in ancient literature. Until now, those who wanted to study this book have had comparatively few options. There is a useful edition of *Annals* 15 originally published by Macmillan and reprinted by Bristol with a commentary by N. P. Miller (1973, republished 2012); this commentary, however, is less than a third the length of Ash's, and is professedly aimed at secondary-school students and undergraduates, and so contains much more basic grammatical and expository help. Scholars could also turn to the commentaries on the whole of the *Annals* by Furneaux (1896) and Koestermann (1968). Both of these works are excellent and remain useful, but single-book commentaries can bring a focus not possible in comprehensive tomes; moreover, the youngest of these is fifty years old, and although classical commentaries do not age nearly so quickly as many believe, Professor Ash is able to bring to bear the double advantage of decades of scholarship and a re-emphasis on those themes that are of especial contemporary interest.

Ash's edition fully lives up to the need. It will be indispensable for Tacitean scholars, but also useful for graduate and advanced undergraduate students. Its detailed notes cover a wide variety of themes, from reviews of scholarship to historical data to simple help with Tacitus' occasionally bewildering grammar. One expects that *Annals* 15 will be read more often in the coming years.

It is worth contrasting Ash with the most recent alternative commentary, Miller (1973). Here, their parallel notes on *Vologaeses concilium vocat* at 15.2.1 give a sense of their style and priorities:

Miller: 'The composition and functions of this council are not clear, but it was probably composed of leading nobles (*megistanes* cf. 27.3), and perhaps also of wise men and magi (Strabo 11.9.3). It was a feudal body, not an assembly of citizens.'

Ash: ‘Rather than consulting his council, Vologeses announces his decision, forestalling debate. Such haughtiness evokes eastern tyrants and high-handed gods (Xerxes, Hdt. 7.8–11; Jupiter in the Lycaon episode, Ovid, *M.* 1.182–252). In epic, such scenes often dramatically begin books (Hom., *Il.* 4.8, 20; Virg., *A.* 10.1–117) or whole works (Enn., *Ann.* fr. 51–5 Sk.), but they generally feature debate. The verb *vocare* “was also used for calling a meeting of the senate (Cic., *Cat.* 2.26, *Dom.* 11 etc.)” (Harrison 1991: 58).’

Miller explains, and cites other sources when they help explain; Ash, by contrast, is almost exclusively interested in literary matters, and mostly cites poets for thematic or structural parallels. Students will probably prefer the first passage, scholars the second, especially if interested in ancient authors specifically as literature—which is the dominant trend these days, and largely the purpose of the ‘Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics’ series.

This comparison brings to the surface some of the commentary’s quirks, which some may judge faults, and others points in its favour. Chief among these is its emphasis on style. Indeed, this is its defining feature in comparison with older commentaries like Furneaux and Koestermann, or even Miller. There was a time when style in history was given little enough attention, but thankfully those benighted days are behind us, and the historiographical renaissance of the last decades has made us alive to the fact that how a Roman author says something can carry at least as much significance as what he says. This is especially true in a writer like Tacitus: as Ash says, ‘Style as a bearer of historical meaning is a powerful weapon in T.’s hands’; and, quoting Oakley, ‘the style of his Latin cumulatively “shakes the reader out of too easy reading”’ (22, 25). One is inclined to remember Syme’s *sententia* ‘Men and dynasties pass, but style abides’.

The reader of the entire commentary, however, may well conclude that there can be too much of a good thing. It sometimes seems as though Ash cares about nothing *but* style. Expository information and historical data must be sifted out of mountains of archaism, Sallustianism, and Livianism. Every appendix sentence (a reverse periodic sentence, where the finite verb comes first and then important information is appended with participles and ablative absolutes) is carefully noted, and only an attentive reader will notice that, between this appendix sentence and that archaic vocabulary, there may be, say, a hidden nugget of information about the Magian religion without which a passage does not make sense. Indeed, Furneaux and Koestermann, even though their commentaries are on the whole of the *Annals* and not only on Book 15, and Miller, whose commentary is much the shortest (less than a third the length of Ash’s), often devote more absolute space to historical and exegetical matter. As one example, in the aftermath of the Fire, when Tacitus

lists the areas that were affected and the buildings that were burned (*Ann.* 15.40), they note that many large buildings survived even in the damaged areas and even touch on the archaeology, whereas Ash observes that Tacitus' language evokes post-battle casualty lists from other historians, and indeed says that 'precise details' were 'less important' (189 ad loc.). That is very possibly true, as far as Tacitus was concerned, but it illustrates a critical difference between those who read Tacitus primarily as history and those who read him primarily as literature.

But, of course, a focus on style is often called for in Tacitus, and here Ash excels. She is at her best when explaining the effects of a stylistic choice, its why as well as its what, or when there is rhetoric to dissect and irony to unmask—which is often, under Nero. Thus no particle of Nero's absurd and grandiose rhetorical posture at 15.36 is allowed to escape safely. Likewise, the analysis of Seneca's *oratio obliqua* defence speech at 15.61, where Seneca subtly shifts the ground of the debate and reframes every accusation, is excellent. Again, whenever Corbulo appears, Ash never flags in discussing how each point of style affects the reader: how, for example, at 15.9 an appendix sentence emphasises the development of events on the ground as a simple action sets off a cascade of reactions, or 15.26 where a catalogue of Corbulo's forces, in a rare periodic sentence, builds (vain) expectations of a great battle.

Significant also is the treatment of Parthia. Eastern affairs are often overlooked by students of Tacitus; the repetition of unfamiliar but similar-sounding names and places can soon become confusing. Ash, however, devotes a large and very useful portion of the introduction to Parthia, noting that the eastern front was of pressing importance to contemporaries. For us non-contemporaries, the notes do yeoman's work in explaining what is even going on, and why it matters. Speaking for myself, I now understand Corbulo's campaigns much better than previously. Of course, most of the notes are about style, but Ash points out how the style serves the narrative, and has a tendency to undermine Corbulo and make him a more problematic figure.

There are, however, only a few passages for which *Annals* 15 is read today, and a commentary on *Annals* 15 must stand or fall on its treatment of such passages. One of these is the Fire (*Ann.* 15.38–41). Here Ash's treatment is outstanding. There is a valuable introduction to the passage, which collects and compares the other ancient sources (mainly Dio and Suetonius) to Tacitus. Many readers may be surprised that the ever-cynical Tacitus is alone in *not* explicitly blaming Nero. Ash discourses on real fires and other historical disaster narratives, and tells how, for instance, in the London fire of 1666, the then Duke of York (*contra* Nero) won great popularity by helping fight the flames. The notes are mainly stylistic; for one example, Tacitus describes the ramshackle temporary housing as *subitaria aedificia* (*Ann.* 15.39), which Ash points out is an ostentatiously lofty avoidance of everyday vocabulary. Other

notes compare Tacitus to Suetonius and Dio, and Ash praises Tacitus both for his even-handedness as a historian and his vividness as an author. Suetonius, for instance, almost ignores the victims of the Fire, and Dio almost ignores the physical destruction, whereas Tacitus covers both; he also mentions only as a rumour what the others present as simple fact, that Nero sang while Rome burned (*Ann.* 15.39). But Ash also points out that calling something ‘only’ a rumour in Tacitus is deceptive, and whether or not Nero actually started the fire and sang during it may be of less real importance than the fact that contemporaries believed rumours that he did so. Uncertainty, no less than style, is a powerful weapon in Tacitus’ hands.

Ash’s notes on the Christian persecution—a short but much-discussed passage—are likewise interesting. An enormous number of citations from other ancient authors and from modern scholarship are collected on every point. I particularly enjoyed the comment that the reason why Tacitus explains the origin of the worship of ‘Christus’ is that, even though this information may have been known to contemporaries, he thought this strange new religion ‘lacked staying power’, and so future readers would need this context (205, on 15.44.3).

The Pisonian conspiracy follows. Here the commentary is again valuable. Ash gives an introduction to each of the conspirators, telling their background, what their role in the conspiracy will be (i.e. whether they squeal), and how they will end up (usually dead). We are told how Tacitus makes his narrative the more credible in that he both cites some sources and also frankly admits when something is uncertain—again unlike other ancient sources, mainly Dio, who present rumours as facts. Ash’s focus on style is helpful here, and guides the reader through the byzantine intrigue and counter-intrigue, such as when unmasking the ironies in Epicharis’ conversation with Volusius and in the pivotal debate between Milichus and Scaevinus, or how colouring and contrast sharpen the sordidness of Piso’s end.

The coverage of the death of Seneca (*Ann.* 15.60–5), however, is somewhat uneven. The passage is introduced very well: Ash summarises the events and the divided scholarly views thereon, and quotes from some of those who have read Seneca’s death negatively, as ridiculous rather than heroic. But there is little in the notes to justify this divided opinion, and a casual reader could easily conclude that there is no serious controversy about Seneca’s death, and that it is universally taken as a noble and philosophical martyrdom. Indeed, Ash is usually at pains to defend Seneca on every point: she describes his interactions with Paulina as evidence of a happy and loving marriage (something that compares favourably with Socrates and his wife, in modern eyes), and argues that his slowness at dying, far from discrediting him, emphasises his determination and recalls ‘the exemplary Cato the Younger’. I happen to agree with this interpretation. Most do not, and one would like a closer examination of the points of controversy. Moreover, readers are owed a clear answer to the

question whether it is likely that Seneca was involved in the conspiracy. Ash's overall treatment strongly implies that he was innocent: the evidence against Seneca is 'preemptively devalued' by Tacitus, and it is shown that Seneca skilfully defends himself against the accusations of Natalis, which, even if true, would not have proved guilt (276–81, on *Ann.* 15.60–1). Yet in a passing note on an indicative verb (*Ann.* 15.60.2: *non quia coniurationis manifestum [Senecam Nero] compererat*), Ash states that Tacitus endorses this rejected reason, i.e., that Seneca was 'plainly guilty'. This deserves fuller treatment. Instead, Ash moves on to talk about the stylistic parallels to *non quia*.¹

The rest of *Annals* 15 is mostly a catalogue of deaths. Ash collects useful data and provides perspective on each. Our attention is drawn to the (for Tacitus) very rare and therefore powerful use of *ipsissima verba* in 15.67. There is also some interesting albeit macabre information about botched executions in ancient literature (299).

A few miscellaneous themes that Ash emphasises at scattered points are worth mentioning. One is repeated reference to Tacitus' foresight, where he gives information that would have been clear to contemporaries but (thankfully for us) 'envisages a remoter audience for his narrative' who would need to know: there are examples regarding fireproofing techniques (201 on *Ann.* 15.43.3) and Christianity (205 on 44.3), and even about the basic topography of Rome, which shows Tacitus' 'confidence about his work's longevity' (189 on 40.2).² Similarly, Ash often points out how Tacitus privileges interpretations that he rejects. The *locus classicus* for this is the putative poisoning of Germanicus on Tiberius' orders, which Tacitus denies but then structures his narrative as if it were true; Ash adds the Pisonian conspiracy, which Tacitus admits was certainly real even as he plants the notion that Nero may have invented the whole affair (319–21, on 15.73), and, of course, any time Tacitus mentions a rumour (e.g. 15.39.3).

This is, as I have said, a needed work, and it lives up to the need. Occasional foibles should not detract from a commentary that is useful, informative, and a pleasure to read. The introduction alone, summarising Tacitus' biography, his sources, the structure of *Annals* 15, the conflict with

¹ Ash is not the only commentator to appear contradictory on this passage: Furneaux also says that it implies Seneca's guilt, yet rules out his involvement elsewhere—see notes on 15.60.3 and 13.1.1, and 75–6 of the introduction. The only commentary that directly addresses this tension is that by Miller (who says plainly 'This does not make sense'): Miller argues that, although *non quia* with the subjunctive would indeed traditionally reject the preferred reason and with the indicative would accept it as factually true but deny its relevance, in fact the plain indicative from Livy on was used in place of the subjunctive, to reject the reason outright; thus Tacitus suggests that Nero 'had no real evidence'.

² Yet could a Roman truly imagine a time when Rome would not be known? Even the vanity of Horace is too humble when he boasts that his *Odes* will be read *dum Capitolium | scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex* (*Carm.* 3.30).

Parthia, the portrayals of Corbulo and Seneca, the Pisonian conspiracy, and style, would make the book a valuable addition to any classicist's library. Its focus on style coincides with contemporary scholarly interest in the subject and also the need felt by those encountering Tacitus for the first (or second or third) time for a guide through the tangled thickets. Ash has helped ensure that *Annals* 15 will be more studied in coming years.

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