

## REVIEW

## A LIFETIME'S WORK ON TACITUS

Werner Suerbaum, *Skepsis und Suggestion: Tacitus als Historiker und als Literat*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015. Pp. 650. Hardback, €83.00. ISBN 978-3-8253-6419-9.

**S***kepsis und Suggestion* is the culmination of Professor Suerbaum's long career of reading and pondering the works of Tacitus. His main thesis, and the explication of the book's subtitle, is that Tacitus is a *skeptischer Historiker* but a *suggestiver Literat*—meaning that Tacitus, as a rational and careful historian, is skeptical about the ability of an historian or a reader to *know* what really happened, but nonetheless, as a skilled author, uses a variety of literary and rhetorical means to *suggest* a certain interpretation of history that he considers probable, without daring to explicitly vouch for its truthfulness on his own authority. This skepticism applies especially to the motives of historical actors, rather than simply to their actions, and chiefly to the motives of the most important historical actors, the emperors (6): 'Die Haltung des Historikers Tacitus zu den überlieferten Fakten und den Motiven der Akteure, vor allem der wichtigsten Akteure der von ihm behandelte Epoche, der Kaiser, ist die des Zweiflers: War es wirklich so? Sind die überlieferten Motive (vor allem der Kaiser) für ihre Aktionen ... glaubhaft?'<sup>1</sup> The literary<sup>2</sup> skill of Tacitus, meanwhile, is involved in unmasking the ostensible motives of the emperors and other powerful actors—in finding the *Sein* beneath the *Schein*—by such techniques as the repetition (or invention) of rumors, or the giving of multiple possible motivations for an action (6–7). It almost goes without saying that the reality that is unmasked is more pessimistic than the appearance that masks it. In this context, readers will remember one of Tacitus' characteristic expressions, *incertum an*, which typically introduces a pair of alternative explanations for an event, the more cynical of which is usually placed last, in the more memorable place.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'The behavior of Tacitus with regard to the facts, as they were handed down, and to the motives of the actors, especially of the most important actors of the period that he treated, the emperors, was that of a skeptic: Was it really so? Are the traditional motives (especially of the emperors) given for their actions ... believable?'

<sup>2</sup> Suerbaum admits (6) that he could easily have referred to Tacitus' *rhetorische Techniken*, but prefers *literarisch* on the grounds that 'literary' has a much wider meaning—and, we might add, is accompanied by many fewer negative connotations—than 'rhetorical'.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Annals* 14.51.1, *concessitque vita Burrus, incertum valetudine an veneno*.

Those familiar with Tacitean scholarship will not find such a thesis very surprising. Nor is it meant to be. Readers should not expect a work of cutting-edge research. *Skepsis und Suggestion* is not a hasty attempt to seem revolutionary, but the product of mature erudition, of many years reading and carefully re-reading the works of Tacitus.<sup>4</sup> Suerbaum himself apologizes—albeit without remorse—for the work’s deficiency of secondary citations, since he prefers, whenever possible, to examine the original text directly; and he admits, with a frankness that does him credit, ‘Mir ist aber—vielleicht stärker als vielen anderen Philologen—bewusst, dass ich in einer langen und reichen Traditionen der Tacitus-Philologie stehe ... Ich kann heute, im Alter von über 80 Jahren, nicht mehr säuberlich unterscheiden, was ich welchem Vordenker verdanke oder was ich mir selber, womöglich gar als erster, an Erkenntnissen direkt aus dem Tacitus-Text erarbeitet habe’ (607–8).<sup>5</sup> Thus Suerbaum’s preference for focusing on the primary text itself—and also the relative lack of originality.<sup>6</sup> But the fact that Suerbaum offers no ground-breaking new theory hardly means that this book has nothing to offer classical scholars. Far from it. There are many nuances of which even knowledgeable readers of Tacitus (or of any author) might have some faint inkling, without being able to put their thoughts into words; and Suerbaum has the gift of clearly and memorably expressing what we only darkly suspected. Moreover, Suerbaum’s commentary on individual episodes, quite apart from his general thesis, is often useful, and always carefully reasoned. He shows no little interpretive skill in teasing out the nuances of specific passages, and his long experience with Tacitus can make it seem as though he has an intuitive judgment concerning Tacitus’ narrative tone or the spirit in which certain Tacitean remarks should be taken (which, as those familiar with Tacitus will know, is not always easy to discern).

Among the first things that will strike readers of this book is its seeming comprehensiveness. One often feels that *Skepsis und Suggestion* should have been titled simply *Tacitus*. It is indeed very wide-ranging, and sometimes appears rather all-inclusive than narrowly focused on Tacitus’ skepticism or literary skill; Suerbaum often takes a meandering path (or perhaps a scenic route)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cic. *Sen.* 38: *adfero res multum et diu cogitatas*.

<sup>5</sup> ‘But it is clear to me—perhaps more than to many philologists—that I stand in a long and rich tradition of Tacitus scholarship ... Today, at the age of more than 80, I can no longer clearly distinguish what I owe to what pioneer or what I have worked out for myself, perhaps first, based on discoveries directly out of the text of Tacitus.’

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 628: ‘Wenn andere dasselbe gesehen haben wie ich, gut: meine Beobachtungen bestätigen dann ihre Erkenntnisse. Wenn ich mehr oder jedenfalls anderes gesehen haben sollte als andere Forscher, umso besser. Die Tacitus-Forschung bedarf nicht immer neuer Ansätze, sondern in gewissen Abständen immer wieder der Überprüfung oder Bestätigung alter Thesen.’

through scholarly issues, and will quote modern poetry (59) or discuss *I, Claudius* (351), in such a way that the connection to the main thesis—that Tacitus is a skeptical *Historiker* but a suggestive *Literat*—is not always perfectly clear. But this, too, is intentional: Suerbaum says that he would have liked to subtitle the book *Beobachtungen* ('Observations'), the better to indicate its varied focus; and, as for the relation of these discrete *Beobachtungen* to the overarching theme, he prefers to let the evidence that he presents speak for itself, so that readers can draw their own conclusions rather than constantly being bombarded by restatements of his own views (608–9, 628). This is admirable. The slow progress of some English-speaking readers (if I may speak for myself) through a 600-page German monograph, however, might cause an occasional wish that, however clearly argued the individual sections, their connection to the main thesis were more explicit.

Before summarizing the contents, it will be useful to discuss briefly the overall structure of the book and Suerbaum's standard procedure within individual chapters. The organization is carefully wrought, and every chapter and section and subsection is marked off and titled; if one looks at the table of contents (placed at the end), one finds *I. Allgemeines*, *II. Skepsis und Suggestion*, and so on. Each of these units is broken down and given a letter, as *E: Zur Unsicherheit überlieferter Fakten* and *F: Entlarvung als Darstellungsstrategie bei Tacitus*; and again, *F1: Vorüberlegungen*, *F2: Die Enthüllung des wahren Charakters des Tiberius*; and finally, at the lowest level, *F2: 1: Die Bilanz*, *2: Der Prozess*, *3: Erklärungsmodelle für das unterschiedliche Erscheinungsbild des Tiberius*, and so on. Each of these categories is clearly labeled in the main body of the text, so that, as one reads on, one always knows exactly how the current argument is unfolding.

Within each of the larger sections that have a thematic unity (e.g. rumors, speeches, or digressions), Suerbaum usually follows a more or less regular procedure. First, he gives a working definition of the issue, then goes on to critique it—to point out all the equivocal cases and to suggest all the ways that the common definition is insufficient, problematic, or simply misleading. Next typically follows an overview of the ancient theories on the subject; when discussing speeches, for instance, Suerbaum touches on the views of Thucydides, Polybius (who is quoted at length), Pompeius Trogus, and the late antique grammarian Diomedes (222–30). The discussion then turns to Tacitus, and Suerbaum usually begins by listing all the relevant passages from the Tacitean corpus, often with detailed tables; again as an example, the examination of speeches begins with a pair of tables (one for direct and one for indirect discourse) counting the significant speeches in the *Histories* and *Annals*, with the total length of each, and calculating the percentage of space in each book devoted to speeches (234–8). Each of the listed cases is then examined individually. Suerbaum's analysis and judgment here is always balanced and reasonable; each passage is carefully considered both on its own and alongside any

other Tacitean passage that might shed light upon it. In this examination, Suerbaum displays a tendency towards moderate conservatism: he is inclined to accept that Tacitus means precisely what he says, and that the text says precisely what it seems to say, and has no qualms identifying Tacitus the narrator with Tacitus the author. The style and method of Suerbaum's analysis is almost that of a broad commentary, and indeed, the book could easily be used as such: if one wants to know more about, say, Piso's trial, or the death notice of Tiberius, one can simply look at the detailed table of contents and turn to the relevant pages; the fact that the book was conceived as semi-discrete *Beobachtungen* means that one can dip into it in this way at any point without losing the thread of the main argument.

A point that often reoccurs in these analyses is the question of Tacitus' sources and his use thereof. Suerbaum disclaims any desire to practice unfashionable *Quellenforschung* (494)<sup>7</sup>—and indeed, he does not seem to be interested in Tacitus' sources on their own account. Rather, he commonly compares Tacitus' narrative with that of his (extant) sources, so as to be able to isolate and distinguish Tacitus' own contribution; it is argued, not unreasonably, that if a statement or an interpretation or a particular twist on the facts is absent from Plutarch or Suetonius or Dio, but is present in Tacitus, or vice versa, then this addition or subtraction tells us more about Tacitus' unique methods and opinions than cases where he follows his sources without deviation. Suerbaum often uses this kind of argument to examine everything from Tacitus' critical methods and use of evidence as an historian (e.g. 249–6) to his literary style (by which criterion Tacitus does not always, in Suerbaum's judgment, surpass his models: e.g. 495–511, a comparison of the ghostly apparition that appeared to Curtius Rufus as told in the versions of Tacitus and Pliny).

Another habit of Suerbaum's, one that I cannot claim to understand, is his preference for citing a Latin text according to the online version hosted by the Latin Library (e.g. 234), whose frequent erroneousness is universally known. Suerbaum, indeed, is not unaware of this problem, and so promises to correct the errors that he finds in the online version according to good textual editions such as the Teubners (610). A cursory glance confirms that Suerbaum does indeed quote the text of the Teubner when it differs from that of the Latin Library—for *Annals* 3.65.1–3, for instance, he follows Borzsák in reading *insignes*

<sup>7</sup> 'Eher unmodern ist es geworden, die Geschichtsdarstellung des Tacitus in den ersten eininhalb Büchern der *Historiae* (bis. hist. 2.51) mit Plutarchs und Suetons Viten des Galba und Otho und jene im erhaltenen Teil der *Annales* mit Suetons Viten des Tiberius, Claudius und Nero sowie mit der späteren Version des Cassius Dio zu vergleichen: Ein solcher Ansatz wird mit dem eher verächtlich gebrauchten, auch in nicht-deutscher Literatur gängigen Begriff "Quellenforschung" abgetan und auch ein im Zeitalter der modernen Intertextualitätsforschung eigentlich naheliegender bloßer Vergleich (ohne das Ziel, eine Abhängigkeit zu beweisen) scheint inopportun zu sein.'

and *quotiens* rather than *insignis* and *quoties*—so we need have no misgivings about the accuracy of the citations. But this raises the question, why bother to use the Latin Library at all (especially when, as at 234, Suerbaum seems to acknowledge that using this version brings additional disadvantages), if he must diligently correct it? Accessibility? But someone who can either purchase an €83 book or has access to it through a university library will surely also have access to a copy of the *Annals*. This is truly a *mysterium tremendum*.

Finally, it cannot go unmentioned that, however careful Suerbaum's arguments and however diligent his research, the current edition of *Skepsis und Suggestion* has a surprisingly large concentration of typographical errors; but, since these do not negatively affect the reader's comprehension, they may be mentioned and then forgotten.

It may now be useful, having described the general characteristics of *Skepsis und Suggestion*, to go through and summarize its individual chapters. Unit I (of five, or six counting the appendices), containing the subsections or chapters *A–C*, serves as a broad introduction to the topic. *A* is simply the introduction, containing a clear and succinct statement of Suerbaum's overall argument (5–11). *B* briefly discusses the biographical facts of the life of Tacitus and the dating of his works (12–23). *C* provides an overview of ancient historiographical theory up to Tacitus; Suerbaum examines the traditional division between *historiae* and *annales* (according to the definition of Sempronius Asellio found in Gellius, which is not found to be a useful distinction), and also some late antique methods of literary analysis that are perhaps stranger to us than to the Romans (24–78). How we read (and should read) the *Annals* is here compared and contrasted with how we read works such as the *Aeneid*. Suerbaum then ponders Tacitus' programmatic statements regarding the historian's duty to be objective and unbiased, primarily the famous *sine ira et studio*; this is taken as evidence that the Romans considered the avoidance of bias as essential to (but not apparently the same as) objectivity: Suerbaum refers to the 'veritas-Prinzip' as fundamental to Roman historiography, and is elsewhere aware that Tacitus analyzes other historians' claims in terms of inherent probability as well as of their biases; but one finds perhaps less on this topic than one might wish. This section continues with discussions of the purpose and value of history in Tacitus, and to what degree we can pin down an opinion as being Tacitean: Suerbaum, while not unaware of the difficulties, seems to be quite comfortable taking first-person statements as direct representations of the author's personal thoughts and feelings.

Unit II, containing chapters *D–H*, is titled *Skepsis und Suggestion* and accordingly forms perhaps the most significant part of the book—certainly the part that engages most closely, or at least most explicitly, with the main theme. *D*, *Das Informationsmonopol der Kaiser*, argues that Tacitus was often skeptical by ne-

cessity, since (by parallel to certain famous statements of Cassius Dio that Suerbaum quotes and discusses) the emperors kept most details of policy secret, even from the Senate, and left outsiders to conjecture (79–87). It is observed that Tacitus is skeptical on at least two fronts, first regarding the historical facts, but even more so regarding the *motives* of historical actors; Suerbaum then argues that Tacitus therefore necessarily employs *Leserlenkung*, or various literary techniques to persuade the reader of a particular interpretation, without explicitly vouching for it. *E* examines a series of concrete examples of this thesis, notably the trial and alleged suicide of Piso and the murder of Drusus by Sejanus—among other mysterious deaths and potential poisonings, such as that of Claudius (88–119). Tacitus' frequent citation of rumors, which he may have invented himself, is one of his major forms of *Leserlenkung*, and the *incertum an* construction, followed by a pair of alternative explanations of motivations of which the more negative almost always comes in the more emphatic place, is a sign both of his skepticism and his rhetoric. Suerbaum notes that most scholarly discussions of these ambiguities seem to express a wish that Tacitus had been more explicit about what he thought, but that this tolerance for uncertainty is actually a point in Tacitus' favor (111).<sup>8</sup> *F*, *Entlarvung als Darstellungsstrategie des Tacitus*, focuses on how Tacitus *unmasks* the negative reality beneath the fair appearance, the *Sein* beneath the *Schein*, especially regarding the consummate hypocrite of the *Annals*, Tiberius (120–91); here, Suerbaum also discusses the epitaph of Tiberius and whether it is portrayed as evil from the beginning or as being corrupted over time, as well as the (to Tacitus) inherent hypocrisy of the Principate. *G* again examines *rumores*, which Suerbaum calls 'ein suggestives literarisches Darstellungsmittel' rather than a matter of historical fact; most of the notable examples are discussed, from the rumor that Tiberius poisoned his own son to the still debated role played by Seneca in the Pisonian conspiracy (192–220). Finally, *H* discusses the direct- and indirect-discourse speeches; the chapter begins with an in-depth analysis of the role of speeches in ancient historiography, both theoretically and in practice, and contains detailed statistics on the frequency of speeches in Tacitus' works (221–47). For some reason, Unit II ends with a short chronological table of Tacitus' life and work, which may have been better placed either at the beginning or end of the book, but which is nonetheless useful—for the major events of each year, for instance, it cites the relevant books of Tacitus that cover them.

Unit III, *Zur Darstellung des historischen Stoffes durch den Schriftsteller*, comprises *J* through *O*. *J* examines Tacitus' use of his historical sources, arguing that (since Tacitus rarely cites any authority) he usually follows a general consensus of previous authors, citing sources only when he deviates—but it is also noted

<sup>8</sup> 'Schwingt hier eine geheime Sehnsucht mit, ein namhafter Historiker solle die Sache, die Streitfrage, die Interpretation autorativ und damit ein für allemal entscheiden, nach dem Motto *Tacito locuto causa finita?* Das wäre abwegig.'

that Tacitus often disagrees with the mainstream tradition, and in these cases, he sometimes puts forward his own arguments about what really happened, but just as often sows doubt regarding events and motives without necessarily suggesting an alternative (249–312). A discussion of Tacitus' use of the *eins für alle* technique, whereby a one-time description of, say, a mutiny stands for all similar occurrences and therefore need not be repeated, falls here. *K* discusses the annalistic format of Tacitus' works and their structure, and the cases and reasons why Tacitus sometimes deviates from this order, such as advancing the death notice of Arminius (*A.* 2.88) so that it can occur in the same book as the death of Germanicus (311–57). *L* is something of a catch-all chapter, looking at all sorts of non-narrative devices, such as death notices (especially that of Tiberius), and how they fit together (358–98); but perhaps the most interesting item in this chapter is the lengthy footnote (384 n. 243) in which Suerbaum, somewhat polemically, expresses his thoughts on narratology, arguing that, whatever may be the case for a work of poetry like the *Aeneid*, there is no reason to divorce the historical Tacitus from the 'Tacitus' narrator of the *Annals*. *M* involves the various digressions of the *Annals* and *Historiae*, from the origin of law to the antiquities of the Jews (399–436). *N* discusses several individual episodes, such as the Phoenix, the supposed dream of the treasure of Dido, and the death of Junius Blaesus under Vitellius (437–80). The unit ends with *O*, a short overview of the portrayal of historical persons, mostly Marcus Lepidus (480–92).

Unit IV, containing only the two relatively short chapters *P* and *Q*, is titled *Vergleich einer Version des Tacitus mit einer älteren Überlieferung*, and concerns how and why Tacitus might depart from his sources, either in matters of fact or in literary presentation. *P* and *Q* are both case-studies: *P* involves the apparition seen by Curtius Rufus, prophesying that he would one day be proconsul of Africa, and its different literary treatments in Pliny (whose version Suerbaum considers superior) and Tacitus (493–511); *Q* concerns the senatorial decree against Piso, the enemy of Germanicus, and compares the recovered official text of the *senatus consultum* with the Tacitean version of Piso's crime, trial, and death—all of which, in light of the difficulties involved in using the official decree (presumably the main source) to understand what really happened, Suerbaum deems one of the most important pieces of evidence for his thesis of Tacitus as a skeptical historian (512–46).

Unit V (the final unit, if we except the appendices), titled *Zur Entwicklung des Politikers, Historikers und Schriftstellers Tacitus*, comprises *R* and *S*. *R*, *Tacitus und Trajan*, is primarily focused on the idea (common among German scholars) that Tacitus, over the course of his works, becomes more and more pessimistic, and that this growing pessimism is due to disillusionment with Trajan—a thesis which Suerbaum rejects, while still finding much Trajanic influence on Tacitus' portrayal of earlier emperors (547–67). *S*, *Vom Schweigen zum Schreiben*,

examines the political behavior of Tacitus himself and what may have led him, after remaining silent under Domitian et al., to write history; Tacitus is compared to Pliny, and his praise of the moderation and *obsequium* of Agricola is compared with his obviously positive treatment of Cremutius Cordus and Thrasea Paetus (568–605).

There follows a series of appendices, such as the *Vereinbarungen mit dem Leser dieses Buches* (which serves almost as an introduction, and should perhaps be read first), an index of names to distinguish the various Agrippinae and Drusi, a brief and non-comprehensive bibliography of useful works, and an index of passages cited (607–44).

*Skepsis und Suggestion*, in short, is a valuable and engaging, if not a revolutionary, work of scholarship. Suerbaum does not advance any new or unheard-of thesis, but a clear exposition of themes that readers may have but darkly suspected. Even apart from its overall thesis, the book's comprehensiveness makes it useful almost as a commentary or reference work, where one can simply look up the relevant episode and find Suerbaum's always carefully reasoned and usually insightful analysis of it. The book's occasional eccentricities do not detract from what is a very readable and a useful study of Tacitus.

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