

REVIEW

A NEW READING OF TACITUS'
DIALOGUS DE ORATORIBUS

Christopher S. van den Berg, *The World of Tacitus' Dialogus de Oratoribus. Aesthetics and Empire in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 344. Hardcover, £74.99. ISBN 978-1-107-02090-0.

Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus* has long resisted easy interpretation. This fictionalized account of a discussion in 75 CE about *eloquentia* and the decline of oratory under the Empire is full of surprises, cruxes, and inconsistencies. Christopher van den Berg, in the first monograph in English committed solely to this work, offers a way out—or, rather, through—the many interpretive challenges of this work. He argues that we must read the dialogue in a synthetic way, attentive to how characters' seemingly opposed viewpoints in many ways inform and complement one another, with Tacitus acting as 'the curator of many voices rather than the sponsor of one' (294). Recent readers of the *Dialogus* have been attuned to its 'polyphonous' characteristics, that is, how Tacitus places valid points into the speeches of all of the dialogue's interlocutors, the orator-turned-poet Curiatius Maternus, the modernist Marcus Aper, and the antiquarian Vipstanus Messalla.¹ This book breaks new ground by reading such 'community of thought' (165) across the work, with great nuance and sensitivity to the text. From this holistic manner of reading the work, V. reaches the heterodox conclusion that the *Dialogus* as a whole does not, in fact, argue for the decline of *eloquentia* or oratorical skill.

After an Introduction in which he lays out his methodology by way of a close reading of Aper's fraught words at 5.5, V. uses Chapter 1 ('The *Dialogus* and its contexts') to summarize the work and survey the place of oratory in Roman public life, from the Republic up until Tacitus' time. Building on the work of Luce,² V. here emphasizes the influence of declamation on the speeches in the *Dialogus*; this point serves to highlight the literariness of the

¹ See S. Goldberg, 'Appreciating Aper: The Defense of Modernity in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*', *CQ* 49 (1999): 224–37, S. Goldberg, 'The Faces of Eloquence: The *Dialogus de Oratoribus*', in A. J. Woodman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2009) 73–84 and R. Mayer, *Tacitus, Dialogus de Oratoribus* (Cambridge, 2001) 47 ('No one character ... wholly represents the views of Tacitus himself').

² T. J. Luce, 'Reading and Response in the *Dialogus*', in T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman, edd., *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition* (Princeton, 1993) 11–38.

speeches and the extent to which the work's interlocutors may be playing parts, 'working through' arguments rather than fully subscribing to them on a personal level. To this end, V. commits Chapter 2 ('Interpretations') to disputing character-oriented and persuasion-oriented readings of the work's speeches. Rather than trying to uncover the avowedly aporetic Tacitus' sympathy with one character or another, or trying to determine which of the speeches is most persuasive (or, rather, least inconsistent), we should look for what V. calls the work's 'argumentative dynamics'. That is, we should read the *Dialogus* in a non-linear way, in search of its 'synthetic argument', in which 'a larger coherence between incompatible or even contradictory positions can be reconstructed through the reader's engagement with the text' (95).

The ensuing chapters bear out this way of reading the work. Chapter 3 ('Interstitial strategies and reading around the speeches') concentrates on the passages before and between the speeches themselves. V. discusses, for example, how Tacitus uses the work's opening chapters to introduce the idea that the possibility for oratorical *fama* is in decline—and not oratorical skill *per se*. Chapter 4 ('A world of *eloquentia*') and Chapter 5 ('An aetiology of contemporary *eloquentia*') highlight the work's many contradictions, as well as the ways in which ostensibly contradictory points of view work in concert when read together. Each of the speakers, V. notes, uses *exempla* that in fact undercut their points, thus inviting readers 'to reflect on the implications of specific inconsistencies' (127) and to deemphasize the importance of the persuasiveness of a given speech. Arguments inform and build upon one another when, for example, the putative foes Maternus and Aper both identify the personal independence that can come through the practice of *eloquentia* (144–5). Each of these speakers also conceives of poetry and oratory as kindred, interrelated demonstrations of *eloquentia* (146–7; see too 227–30). More broadly, when the speeches are read as complementary pieces, we see that the changes in oratorical style discussed by Aper are given their causes by Maternus' and Messalla's speeches about changes in cultural circumstances. Along similar lines, V. also underscores how the interlocutors' actions belie many of their words: in his speech Messalla laments the loss of oratory's good old days, but earlier on (at 14.3) he had enthusiastically noted the oratorical excellence of the present company (114–16); the secluded retreat for which Maternus longs in his first speech is in fact found in the secluded setting of the *Dialogus* itself (143–4).

Chapter 6 ('From *De Oratore* to *De Oratoribus*') explores how the web of inter- and intratexts in the dialogue point towards a synthetic reading of the work. Inter- and intratexts frequently confirm points of emphasis, but they also allow parallel, contradictory arguments to coexist in the text. So, through 'voracious allusions' (227) to Cicero's *de Oratore*, Tacitus is able to bring in Ciceronian points of view while at the same time modulating and

reworking them. In Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 ('Literary criticism and history: Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian in the *Dialogus*') V. examines how the *Dialogus* incorporates traditional Ciceronian ideas about the importance of accommodation and innovation to support its own case for the orator's need to adapt to his times. In this analysis, the differences between 'the ancients' and 'the moderns'—and the very concept of decline in oratorical skill—collapse. What matters and what has always mattered to the successful orator is *iudicium*. The Ciceronian age was not, as Messalla asserts in his speech, the telos of oratory at Rome. Like Cicero himself, as well as Horace and Quintilian in their writing on literary history, the *Dialogus* advocates, rather, an 'open teleology with development towards contemporary expectations' (277).

The modernist Aper delivers the final remark of the *Dialogus* (42.2), and it is not surprising that V., who leads with Aper in his Introduction, also gives the modernist the last word. V. wraps up the Conclusion by singling out Aper's avowed openness to change and the measure of *libertas* that can result from it (302). If Tacitus is the 'curator of many voices' in this work, then—in V.'s analysis³—Aper's voice surely resounds loudest. A significant accomplishment of this book is that it shows how much Maternus' and Messalla's speeches complement Aper's arguments even as they challenge them.

V.'s argument about the *Dialogus*' advocacy of *iudicium* and accommodation as the orator's most important traits is thus convincing. And in this light, his arguments elsewhere which aim to play down the specter and influence of the emperor (e.g., 155–6, on the *potentes* at 2.1)⁴ and the changes to the courts brought on by the principate (e.g., 189–90)⁵ seem unneeded. But such discussions will spark further thought and work on the *Dialogus*.

This book will also point readers of Tacitus' historical writing in new directions, an aim that V. expresses at 49–50.⁶ V.'s argument for reading the *Dialogus*' speeches synthetically may be valuable for how we read characters' countervailing points of view within a work (e.g., the different perspectives on succession articulated by Galba at *Hist.* 1.15–16 and Mucianus at *Hist.* 2.76–

³ Like that of Goldberg (1999).

⁴ Can it be that the *potentes* ('those in power') in 75 CE (whom Maternus was said to have offended with his play *Cato*) had no link with the emperor or those in his circle? V. makes this suggestion when questioning the common scholarly identification of a seemingly 'anti-principate' Maternus early in the dialogue and then a seemingly 'pro-principate' Maternus in his second speech, which is laudatory of the emperor (see esp. 41.4).

⁵ O. F. Robinson, *The Criminal Law of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 1995) 6–11, cited by V., reviews some of the ways in which the arrival of the principate changed judicial procedure.

⁶ See also the essays in O. Devillers, ed., *Les opera minora et le développement de l'historiographie tacitienne* (Bordeaux, 2014) on points of contact between Tacitus' *opera minora* and his historical writing.

7)⁷ or across works (e.g., the contrasting philosophies of senatorial conduct offered by Eprius Marcellus at *Hist.* 4.8, Curtius Montanus at *Hist.* 4.42, and Thrasea Paetus at *Ann.* 14.48, 15.20–1). More broadly, V.’s model of non-linear and holistic reading, rooted in the close engagement with diction and textuality, is a healthy call to readers of Tacitus and of ancient historiography as a whole.

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⁷ See, for starters, E. Keitel, ‘The Structure and Function of Speeches in Tacitus’ *Histories* I–III’, *ANRW* II.33.4 (Berlin, 1991) 2772–94 and E. Keitel, ‘Speech and Narrative in *Histories* 4’, in Luce and Woodman (1993) 39–58 (cit. n. 2 above) on the speeches in *Hist.* 1–3 and *Hist.* 4, respectively.