

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

DECONSTRUCTING NERO AND DOMITIAN?

Verena Schulz, *Deconstructing Imperial Representation: Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius on Nero and Domitian*. *Mnemosyne* Supplements 427. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019. Pp. xii + 410. Hardback, €132.00/\$159.00. ISBN 978-90-04-40721-3.

This book will be most useful to people interested in Dio. Its premise is that the writers who criticised Nero and Domitian (Tacitus, Dio, Suetonius) did so in response to positive material that was available during the lifetimes of those emperors—panegyrics and official ‘imperial representation’. So the ‘deconstructing’ of the title refers not to the author of this volume, but to the way in which Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius supposedly ‘deconstruct’ other material in the making of their own. Judging from its notes, this book seems to depend on a recent work by Lisa Cordes (*Kaiser und Tyrann: Die Kodierung und Umkodierung der Herrscherrepräsentation Neros und Domitian* (Berlin and New York, 2017)) for its deconstruction methodology. To my mind this premise is drawing a long bow and I am ultimately unconvinced, but as a study of rhetorical techniques in Dio (and to a lesser extent in Tacitus and Suetonius) it will be very welcome to readers interested in those authors as creators of literary works.

What Schulz (henceforth S.) hopes to do here is to show that criticism of these two emperors is not just a matter of using the known themes and motifs of praise and those of blame, but also of establishing a direct relationship between the praise and the blame. This seems to be going too far and, especially given the almost complete absence of these praising sources from the main part of the book, I am not convinced that we are dealing with anything more than the usual themes of praise and blame coming up differently in authors of the period (praise) and of the later period (blame). It is perfectly acceptable, nay obvious, that many of the rhetorical themes and motifs of the official and panegyric material would be inverted or subverted when it came to writing criticism, since the themes of praise and those of blame are often mirror images of each other. This book is in fact a detailed study of the rhetorical techniques Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius use to negatively characterise their emperors.

The strongest part of the book, and its central core, is the section on Dio. As a philological approach to rhetoric in Dio it is welcome. The methodology of deconstruction seems to lend itself best to Dio, and also to Domitian more than Nero. The overarching theory is ‘pragmatic discourse analysis’, which is

briefly explained (38–9) but not quite convincingly linked with the methodology of the book, and then does not come up again until the conclusion. An appendix explains the rhetorical strategies at play in the historians Tacitus and Dio.

The first chapter of the book is a case-study in ‘deconstruction’ using the treatment of dinner-parties in relation to Domitian and Nero to show how the same kinds of material can be used both positively and negatively. It is never clearly explained how we can be sure it is being used in one way or the other. Chapter 2 explains the theory (somewhat too little, too late). At times it is confusing whether ‘imperial representation’ means official representations of the emperor (put out by the emperor and his supporters) or panegyric, or both. They are distinguished from each other on occasion (e.g., 80) but often taken together, on the understanding that panegyric issues directly from the palace. References to the positive portrayal all but drop out after the introductory section. Perhaps it would have been a more convincing premise if the praise texts had been given first, so we could see what is being responded to. As it is, the texts to be compared often appear in reverse order (but at 83 in praise/blame order) and arranging the material by author—Tacitus, Dio, Suetonius—rather than looking at all three authors on one theme seems to exacerbate this problem.

The main part of the book is arranged in parts by author: first Tacitus, then Dio, then Suetonius. I can only explain this choice of order as intended to keep the biographer apart from the historians. The three authors appear together only in the conclusion.

Tacitus

In Chapter 3, we are taken through the major themes of Tacitus’ deconstruction, such as military prowess or lack thereof, building programmes, performance, and then in Chapter 4 the main literary techniques Tacitus uses to achieve this deconstruction. There are three devices, listed on 94 and then taken one by one: Tacitus might (1) present something with negative connotations, either directly or indirectly, (2) he might find fault with the reasons for doing something (perhaps connected with character), or (3) he might present something as ‘transgressing temporal or social logic’. Since it is unlikely that these techniques apply only to Tacitus, it might have been more efficient to consider the topics across the three authors rather than one at a time. The Tacitus section deals mainly with Nero, and deals with these issues separately: for the first literary strategy, ‘negative connotations’, there are the headings ‘comments and order’, ‘*hubris* versus *moderatio*’, ‘narrative performance of gender and ethnicity’; for the second strategy, ‘causation and character’, the sub-headings ‘the emperor’s reasoning: the sterile Octavia’s abortion’, ‘reasons

for the emperor's behaviour' and 'motivation and character'; then for the third literary strategy, 'new forms of logic', we have ways that Tacitus' emperors (mainly Nero) defy logic: 'temporal logic: the manipulation of chronological order' and 'social logic: empty or perverted norms'. The final part on Tacitus is about 'creating uncertainty' in the *Annals* and *Agricola*. Here Tiberius comes up as well as Nero, and a little bit on Domitian (140–1). S. argues that Tacitus deliberately creates uncertainty through introducing variant traditions and playing with oppositions, and that both are 'disconcerting' for the reader and lead the reader to distrust Tacitus. Against other scholars who have posited (reasonably, in my view) that the alternatives Tacitus offers are a form of historical honesty about the possibilities of the unknown, S. argues that in fact Tacitus introduces these variants even when they weaken the overall characterisation as a way of creating 'cognitive dissonance' in the reader. The argument is that producing more than one option 'disconcerts' the reader and is a way of making us feel uncomfortable (i.e., negative) about the emperor himself. In this section Tacitus' techniques are presented as independent rhetorical strategies. The panegyric/official representation (of Nero, Tiberius, Domitian) to which Tacitus is supposedly responding hardly figures after Chapter 3.

Dio

Part 3 is on Dio, where the author acknowledges (170) that Dio uses this method of 'deconstruction' more often than Tacitus (and, as we will see, also more than Suetonius). The part on Dio (as noted above, the strongest part of the book) also brings in representation of other emperors, such as Caligula and the Severans. In this part the discussion looks back to Tacitus, as in the final section it will look from Suetonius back across both Dio and Tacitus. As the book moves onward, more material is available for comparison.

It will be helpful to readers interested in Dio if I outline the contents of this section. The introduction to this section positions this part of the book as 'the first systematic analysis of literary techniques in the *Roman History*' (169). Chapter 6, 'Writing Historiography under the Severans', jumps the considerable distance from Tacitus to Dio to introduce the historical context of Dio, his 'ideals' and the problems with the text, and a digression on Dio's own role in the story he is telling. The 'topics of imperial representation' that Dio uses are listed in Part 2, mainly the same ones that Tacitus used, adding education (183). In this section many of the examples are about another emperor such as Caracalla or Commodus, rather than Nero or Domitian. Section 2.2 makes some interesting points about how Dio's emperors relate back to Julius Caesar and Augustus as prototypes. Chapter 7 comes back to Nero and Domitian, analysing the rhetorical techniques Dio uses on roughly the same pattern as

the first chapter of the Tacitus section, taking each ‘strategy’ one by one: (1) ‘negative connotations’; (2) ‘persuasive characters’; (3) ‘the rhetoric of combination’; (4) ‘selection and focus’; and (5) ‘spoiling the atmosphere’. Chapter 8 gets away again from Nero and Domitian to the more general way Dio approaches ‘bad’ emperors, and the argument is that he ‘establishes explicit or implicit typologies of emperors’—that is, Nero and Domitian in some ways reproduce the themes of earlier *principes*, and then others closer to the time of Dio such as Elagabalus will do the same again. So Nero and Domitian can be said to be recalling the emperors before them, at the same time as foreshadowing the ones that come later. This is reasonable, but the next section seeks to explain the choice of Nero and Domitian by bringing in a surprising and confusing few pages on ‘hot memory’, a theoretical concept brought in here supposedly to explain why Dio might still, so long afterwards, think it worth savaging the memory of these emperors. In the final section ‘genealogies versus typologies’ S. collects together the instances where Dio comments on someone’s (in)valid genealogical claims, ‘deconstructing’ the genealogical/familial claims the emperors and their supporters made. This is interesting, though brief, and might be worth putting next to what Suetonius, who is also interested in genealogy, is doing with similar material. There is a concise conclusion to Section 3.

Suetonius

The section on Suetonius (using *Caligula* as well as *Nero* and *Domitian*) demonstrates the awkwardness of fitting this methodology to this author. S. recognises that Suetonius is doing something different from Tacitus/Dio, but nonetheless tries applying to this work what she applied to them (269). If she recognises that Suetonius is doing something different, why talk about ‘lost potential’ (334)? On occasion S. makes some perceptive observations and suggestions—I found some points quite cogent, such as when she goes against some of the older scholarship by saying ‘The reader is not simply left alone to make sense of Suetonius’ account and to draw a conclusion himself’ (340)—but then on other occasions she seems rather off the mark—for instance, talking about what Suetonius ‘should’ have done (319 and 328). In general S. is fairly disapproving of Suetonius (esp. 338–9 and 341).

Much of the section on Suetonius sets out rhetorical strategies that the biographer uses—but calling it ‘bias’ rather than ‘design’, which is to my mind unhelpful. For S., everything is ‘deconstruction’ rather than what would usually be called, for Suetonius, ‘characterisation’ or ‘style’. She professes (314 and 318) that Suetonius’ method is a ‘weaker’ form of deconstruction (than Dio’s and Tacitus’) because Suetonius includes the virtues as well as the vices. When S. points out (319), perceptively, that Suetonius also undermines the

virtues of the bad emperors and undermines the vices of the good ones, I would have thought this could represent another way of deconstructing—not suppressing, but subverting, the record and tradition. It is not clear to me whether S. thinks this weakens the deconstruction or strengthens what appears weak (she calls it ‘ambivalence’). These are central characterising techniques of Suetonius and are interesting as rhetorical devices, but maybe the methodology of deconstruction does not work here. In fact, when Suetonius does not do what S. is expecting (e.g., about *Nero* 40), perhaps she could go into the effect this has (329)? I would think it is interesting that Suetonius does not do what the others do, but it seems inconvenient for this study. On another occasion (330 n. 147) an interesting point about what Suetonius does with gold (for Nero) might have been used in the argument to some effect.

So we have two sections where the deconstruction methodology could work (Tacitus and Dio) and one where it does not, but it is not clear what that is meant to show. The final tally seems to be that there is something missing from Suetonius, and that it is his fault this approach does not work: ‘We can, finally, see that deconstruction is not played out to the fullest in Suetonius by noting the historiographical strategies [i.e. the strategies used by the historians Tacitus and Dio] that do not occur in his biographies’ (356). The Suetonius section, which is at times very interesting (esp. the chapter on miscellany) occasionally gives the impression of having been incorporated only as an inconvenience to the author. But when the final section on Suetonius (Chapter 11) does explain that Suetonius is not trying to do the same thing that Dio and Tacitus are doing, it begins to seem a little fruitless to have brought him into this in the first place.

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In some ways this book would most profitably be read in reverse order. Some of the crucial assumptions and methodological principles are only (or best) explained at the end, in the conclusion and appendix. The section on Dio is the core and ‘central’ part of the book—the part to which the methodology most profitably and appropriately applies—and the Tacitus section a kind of complement to the Dio one; the last part of the section on Suetonius (which argues that Suetonius has different aims from those of Dio and Tacitus, and suggests affinities with other genres) would surely be more useful before the other parts on Suetonius.

I am not convinced that these two emperors were a good choice to demonstrate the methodology. There is an imbalance between the available material to show how Nero and Domitian were praised. Between the two emperors, there is more material to criticise Nero and more to praise Domitian—the author recognises the imbalance, but makes up for it by bringing in material that I am not convinced really bears on the relevant emperor at all.

An apt example comes from the first chapter, a case study of the technique of deconstruction. S. uses dinner parties as a way to demonstrate how the same material might be shown in both praise and blame. However, the imbalance shows itself even here, in that (as she acknowledges at 17) although there is ‘praise’ of Domitian’s behaviour vis-à-vis dinner parties (viz., Statius’ *Silvae*) there is none for Nero. It seems to me inappropriate to then bring in Petronius’ *Satyrica* to fill this gap. If there is not panegyric material to do with Nero, why not choose a different set of emperors? Tiberius springs to mind as an emperor who does attract both praise and blame, and who also seems an interesting character to put next to Domitian (as S. nearly says, at 201). It seems, even from this case-study (and in the rest of the book) that Domitian is best suited to this methodology, rather than Nero. When the praise material does come in, I am disappointed that it is not more fully given to us. In most cases the authors with whom we can be expected to be most familiar (Tacitus, Dio, Suetonius) are quoted in full, where the authors most readers are likely to be less familiar with, such as Calpurnius Siculus, are given references, but not quoted (65 n. 27).

This volume is a ‘lightly adapted version’ of a *Habilitationschrift* from 2018, and a few points are worth noting on that count. The English expression is very good, but retains a lot of German phrases, and the notes keep references to German sources even when an English version is available. The book has been nicely produced and I noticed only a few typos (329, 343, 352) and a mistake on 323 (where ‘Titus’ Suetonius’ must surely mean ‘Suetonius’ Titus’).

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