

## SOURCING THE NERONIA: TACITUS, *ANNALS* 14.20–1\*

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*Abstract:* This paper suggests that the contemporary reception of the Neronia as described by Tacitus in the *Annals* is indebted to the Roman reception of rhetoric as described by Suetonius in his *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*.

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*Keywords:* Tacitus, Suetonius, Neronia, rhetoric

Innovation was not always a straightforward matter in a society such as that of ancient Rome, where appeals to precedent were almost second nature.<sup>1</sup> When in AD 48 it was proposed to broaden the senate by admitting chiefs from Gaul, there was, says Tacitus, *multus ea super re uariusque rumor* (*Ann.* 11.23.1). In the *princeps*' presence individuals argued the case for and against, the latter being summarised by Tacitus in indirect speech (11.23.2–4), while Claudius' positive response before the senate is given in *oratio recta* (11.24). Claudius' actual words, as is well known, have been partly preserved on the famous Lyon inscription and may be compared with the version which Tacitus has handed down.<sup>2</sup>

Another occasion happened twelve years later in AD 60, when the festival of the Neronia was established at Rome (*Ann.* 14.20–1).<sup>3</sup> Once again there were differing reactions,<sup>4</sup> and on this occasion the historian gives us the two opposing views in indirect speech throughout, with the critics of the festival speaking first. The passage begins as follows (14.20.1–4):<sup>5</sup>

Nerone quartum Cornelio Cosso consulibus quinquennale ludicrum **Romae institutum est ad morem Graeci** certaminis, uaria fama, ut cuncta ferme **noua**. <sup>2</sup>**Quippe** erant qui **Cn. quoque Pompeium** incusatum a senioribus ferrent quod mansuram theatri sedem posuisset: nam **antea** subitariis gradibus et scaena in tempus structa **ludos edi** solitos uel, si **uetustiora** repetas, stantem populum spectauisse ne, si **consideret** theatro, **dies totos ignauia** continuaret; <sup>3</sup>[ne] spectacu-

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<sup>1</sup> On the general question of innovation see D'Angour (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Malloch (2020).

<sup>3</sup> See Champlin (2003) 72–3.

<sup>4</sup> Hardie (2012) 298–9.

<sup>5</sup> The reason for the various emphases will become clear in due course.

lorum quidem antiquitas seruaretur quotiens **praetores ederent**, nulla cuiquam ciuium necessitate certandi; <sup>4</sup>ceterum abolitos **paulatim** patrios **mores** funditus euerti per accitam lasciuiam, ut quod usquam corrumpi et corrumpere queat in urbe uisatur, degeneretque **studiis** externis **iuuentus**, gymnasia et otia et turpes amores **exercendo**, principe et **senatu** auctoribus, qui non modo licentiam uitii permiserint sed uim adhibeant, <ut> proceres Romani specie orationum et carminum scaena polluantur ...

The festival was established at Rome (*Romae institutum est*) according to Greek custom (*morem*) and was met with varying report, as is almost always the way with new things (*noua*). Its critics said that, even though there had been no permanent theatre at Rome until as late as Pompey the Great (*Cn. Pompeium*), his contemporaries had nevertheless complained about the development. Previously (*antea*) a temporary stage had been used for the production of games (*ludos edi*) or, if you went back to still older times (*uetustiora*), spectators actually stayed standing, lest, if they sat down (*consideret*), they might spend whole days in idleness (*dies totos ignauia*). Of course the ancient spectacles should be maintained whenever the praetors produced them (*praetores ederent*), but ancestral custom (*mores*) had been gradually (*paulatim*) abandoned and was now being overturned entirely, with the result that young men (*iuuentus*) would become degenerate because of foreign enthusiasms (*studiis*) and immoral practices (*exercendo*) which appeared to have imperial and senatorial (*senatu*) encouragement.

But the new development was approved (*placebat*) by the majority, although they used honourable names for it (*honesta nomina*) to salve their consciences (14.21.1–3):

Pluribus ipsa licentia **placebat**, ac tamen **honesta nomina** praetendebant: **maiores** quoque non abhorruisse spectaculorum oblectamentis pro **fortuna** quae tum erat, eoque a Tuscis accitos histriones, a Thuriis equorum certamina; et possessa Achaia Asiaque **ludos curatius editos**, nec quemquam **Romae honesto** loco ortum ad theatrales artes degenerauisse, ducentis iam annis a L. Mummi triumpho, qui primus id **genus** spectaculi in urbe praebuerit; <sup>2</sup>sed et **consultum** parsimoniae quod perpetua sedes theatro locata sit potius quam immenso sumptu singulos per annos consurgeret ac sterneretur; nec **perinde** magistratus rem familiarem exhausturos aut populo efflagitandi Graeca certamina <a> magistratibus causam fore, cum eo sumptu **res publica** fungatur; <sup>3</sup>**oratorum** ac uatum uictorias incitamentum ingeniis adlaturas; nec cuiquam iudici graue aures **studiis honestis** et uoluptatibus concessis impertire.

Even their ancestors (*maiores*) had not refrained from delighting in such spectacles as existed in the old days, given the conditions (*fortuna*) at the time; it was for that reason that actors had been summoned from Etruria, and, when Rome had taken possession of Greece and Asia, more care (*curatius*) had been given to the production (*editos*) of games (*ludos*). At Rome (*Romae*) no one of honourable (*honesto*) birth had stooped to theatrical performances, although it was now 200 years since the first occasion on which that form (*genus*) of spectacle was put on. A permanent theatre meant that men had consulted (*consultum*) the interests of thrift, and as a result of the new developments magistrates would not be wasting their money in the same way (*perinde*), the state (*res publica*) would bear the costs, the victories of orators (*oratorum*) and poets would act as an incentive, and no judge would find it hard to listen to the results of honourable study (*studiis honestis*).

Tacitus concludes the episode by saying that the festival passed off without any scandal (14.21.4):

<sup>4</sup>Sane nullo insigni dehonestamento id spectaculum transiit. Ac ne modica quidem **studia** plebis exarsere, quia redditu quamquam scaenae pantomimi certaminibus sacris **prohibebantur**. Eloquentiae primas nemo tulit, sed uictorem esse **Caesarem** pronuntiatum.

Nor was there any crowd trouble, since the pantomimes had been prevented from performing (*prohibebantur*) and there was nothing to rouse the enthusiasms (*studia*) of the people; nor was any first prize awarded for performative eloquence, although Nero (*Caesarem*) was pronounced the winner.

Tacitus' lengthy account of the Neronia differs strikingly from the brief notices in Suetonius (*Nero* 12.3–4) and Dio (62(61).21), the chief difference being his presentation of contemporary reactions to the festival. How did Tacitus know what people were saying more than half a century before he was writing (14.20.2 *erant qui . . . ferrent*)?<sup>6</sup> Of course it was not beyond the wit of a rhetorically trained writer to invent arguments on the familiar antitheses of Greek and Roman, old and new, but that Tacitus was not simply inventing out of thin air is suggested by the critics' reference to sedentary idleness (14.20.2): *stantem populum spectauisse, ne, si consideret theatro, dies totos ignauia continuaret*. Although the expression *dies totos* is common, the juxtaposition of the accusative plural with a reference to sedentary idleness seems unparalleled except in an edict of 92 BC in which the censors Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus (cos. 96) and L. Licinius Crassus (cos. 95) denounced the popular schools of rhetoric as un-Roman and which is quoted by both Suetonius (*Gram. et rhet.*

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus was probably writing Book 4 of the *Annals* in AD 115 (Woodman (2018) 85–7).

25.2) and Gellius (*NA* 15.11.2): *ibi homines adulescentulos **dies totos desiderere***.<sup>7</sup> It is as if Tacitus has rendered the two meanings of *desidere* ('to sit down' and 'to be idle') by *consideret* and *ignauia* respectively;<sup>8</sup> this invites the question of whether Tacitus is echoing the edict.

The censorial edict of 92 BC was in fact well known: Crassus, one of the speakers in Cicero's *De Oratore*, is made to refer to 'my edict as censor' (3.93 *ego censor edicto meo*), and Tacitus himself in his *Dialogus* (35.1) puts a reference to it into the mouth of one of the speakers, Messalla, whose choice of the verb *placuisse* seems to pick up the repeated use of the same verb elsewhere in the censors' edict.<sup>9</sup> That the situation in the *Annals* is more complicated, however, will become clear if we consider the context in which the edict is quoted by Suetonius.

Suetonius is giving an account of the introduction at Rome of rhetoric, whose Greek origin is signposted by its very name, and he begins with its difficult progress before he moves on to its more enthusiastic adoption (*Gram. et rhet.* 25.1–3):

*Rhetorica quoque apud nos **perinde** atque grammatica sero recepta est, paululo etiam difficilior, **quippe** quam constet nonnumquam etiam **prohibitam exerceri**. <sup>2</sup>Quod ne cui dubium sit **uetus** <s.c.>, item censorium edictum subiciam:*

C. Fannio Strabone M. Valerio Messala coss. M. Pomponius **praetor senatum consuluit**. Quod uerba facta sunt de philosophis et rhetoribus, de ea re ita censuerunt, ut M. Pomponius **praetor** animaduerneret **curaretque** ut ei e **re publica** fideque sua uideretur, uti **Romae** ne essent.

De isdem interiecto tempore Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, L. Licinius Crassus censores ita edixerunt:

Renuntiatum est nobis esse homines qui **nouum genus** disciplinae **instituerunt**, ad quos **iuuentus** in **ludum** conueniat; eos sibi **nomen** imposuisse Latinos rhetoras; ibi homines adulescentulos **dies totos desiderere**. **Maiores** nostri quae liberos suos discere et quos in **ludos** itare uellent **instituerunt**. Haec **noua**, quae praeter consuetudinem ac **morem maiorum** fiunt, neque **placent** neque recta uidentur. Quapropter et iis qui eos **ludos** habent et iis qui eo uenire consuerunt

<sup>7</sup> Otherwise the closest parallels seem to be Ter. *Hec.* 800 *totum desedi diem* and Just. 21.5.4 *totis diebus desiderere*.

<sup>8</sup> See Isid. *Orig.* 10.77 *desidiosus...a desidendo uocatus, id est ualde sedendo* (see Maltby (1991) 183).

<sup>9</sup> See Mayer (2001) 196.

uisum est faciundum ut ostenderemus nostram sententiam: nobis non **placere**.

Rhetoric, says Suetonius, was introduced only late, in the same way (*perinde*) as grammar; in fact its cultural progress was even more difficult, since (*quippe*) sometimes it was prevented from being practised at all (*prohibitam exerceri*). To illustrate his point, Suetonius quotes two documents, of which the first is an old (*uetus*) senatorial decree of 161 BC: the praetor had consulted the senate (*praetor senatum consuluit*) on the matter and the result had been that he should take care (*curaret*) that, as seemed to be in the interests of the state (*re publica*), there be no rhetoricians at Rome (*Romae*). The second document is the censorial edict of 92 BC: the censors had been made aware that various individuals, calling themselves by a particular name (*nomen*), had established (*instituerunt*) a new form (*nouum genus*) of discipline, and young men (*iuuentus*) had been gathering at their schools (*ludum*) and spending whole days in sedentary idleness (*dies totos desiderere*). In the past it was our ancestors (*maiores*) who established (*instituerunt*) which schools (*ludos*) their young men attended, but these new developments (*noua*) are contrary to ancestral custom (*morem maiorum*) and both the operators of these schools (*ludos*) and their attenders do not meet with our approval (*placent ... placere*).

But in due course, as Suetonius goes on to say, there was a change in attitude (*Gram. et rhet.* 25.3):

**Paulatim** et ipsa utilis **honestaque** apparuit, multique eam et praesidii causa et gloriae appetuerunt. Cicero ad praeturam usque etiam Graece declamauit, Latine uero senior quoque et quidem cum consulibus Hirtio et Pansa, quos discipulos et grandes praetextatos uocabat. **Cn. Pompeium** quidam historici tradiderunt sub ipsum ciuile bellum, quo facilius C. Curioni promptissimo iuueni causam Caesaris defendenti contradiceret, repetisse declamandi consuetudinem; M. Antonium, item Augustum ne Mutinensi quidem bello omisisse. Nero **Caesar** primo imperii anno, publice quoque bis **antea**, declamauit. Plerique autem **oratorum** etiam declamationes **ediderunt**. Quare magno **studio** hominibus iniecto, magna etiam professorum ac doctorum profluxit copia, adeoque floruit ut nonnulli ex infima **fortuna** in ordinem **senatorium** atque ad summos honores processerint.

Gradually (*paulatim*) rhetoric began to seem useful and honourable (*honestaque*) and it was taken up by various republican notables, including Pompey (*Cn. Pompeium*), as well as by Augustus and Nero: Nero Caesar (*Nero Caesar*) declaimed in the first year of his reign and also twice previously (*antea*) in public. Moreover, many orators (*oratorum*) published (*ediderunt*) their perform-

ances, and, as a result of the great enthusiasm (*studio*) for rhetoric, some were able to rise from the lowest condition (*fortuna*) to become senators (*senatorium*) and office-holders.

Both Suetonius and Tacitus are dealing with the introduction of a cultural phenomenon which is new and Greek,<sup>10</sup> and both move from describing its critics to describing its success. Quite apart from the similarity of theme and treatment, however, the two authors share a considerable amount of vocabulary, including a reference to sedentary idleness which cannot be paralleled elsewhere in this exact form. Is there a relationship between the two passages, and, if so, is there anything to be made of it?

More than forty years ago, in a paper which now seems forgotten,<sup>11</sup> I discussed what I called ‘substantive imitation’ and I illustrated it by a passage in Book 1 of the *Annals* where Tacitus had imitated two passages of his own earlier work, the *Histories*.<sup>12</sup> My suggestion was not that the author was attempting to underline the cyclical nature of history, of which he was perfectly well aware (*Ann.* 3.55.5), but that, when he was about to describe a certain kind of event, particularly an event for which he had no source material, his mind naturally resorted to a pre-existing description of a similar event. It seems reasonable to speculate that a comparable process is operative at *Annals* 14.20–1. When Tacitus came to write his account of the *ludi* at which Nero was declared the winner in performative eloquence, his mind not unnaturally went back to the censorial edict on rather different *ludi* to which he had referred some years earlier in the *Dialogus* and in which performative eloquence was also at issue. By the well known phenomenon of ‘associated reminiscence’, this mental reverberation took him to the text in which he had most recently encountered the censorial edict, the *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*,<sup>13</sup> where Suetonius’ contextualisation of the schools of rhetoric provided Tacitus with

<sup>10</sup> In Tacitus the Greekness of the *ludi* is mentioned explicitly (14.20.1; cf. 14.21.2). In the case of Suetonius’ first quotation (of the *senatus consultum*) the Greekness of the rhetoricians is clear from the context, and in his second quotation (of the censorial edict) the Greekness of the phenomenon is implied by the oxymoronic expression *Latinos rhetoras*. For the question whether the latter expression occurs also in Gellius see Kaster (1995) 273.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Pelling (2022) 39. My paper appeared in a volume on intertextuality which is omitted from the sixteen-page bibliography on intertextuality compiled by Baraz and van den Berg (2013).

<sup>12</sup> Woodman (1979), esp. 152–3 = (1998) 70–85, esp. 80–3.

<sup>13</sup> The relationship between Suetonius and Tacitus has often been the subject of discussion, but it is usually based on Suetonius’ *De uita Caesarum*, which is thought to have been published between AD 119 and 122 (see, e.g., Power (2010) and (2014) = (2021) 17–45 and 179–200); the *De grammaticis et rhetoribus* is believed to be earlier, perhaps belonging to the years 107–118 (Kaster (1995) xxi). For ‘associated reminiscence’ see Cook (1901); for the term ‘reverberation’ see [Brown] (1862) 109, unaccountably mis-referenced by Woodman (2012) 385 n. 31.

material to elaborate, as our other sources do not, on the contemporary reaction to Nero's *ludi*. Of course we have no access to an author's mind, and other readers may prefer a more conservative interpretation to the radical speculation offered here.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For the terms 'conservative' and 'radical' and their application to the scholarship of allusion see Levene (2010) 82–6.

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