

REVIEW

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL METHODS IN TACITUS AND SUETONIUS

Pauline Duchêne, *Comment écrire sur les empereurs? Les procédés historiographiques de Tacite et Suétone*. Scripta Antiqua 137. Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2020. Pp. 332. Paperback, €25.00. ISBN 978-2-35613-349-6.

The title of this monograph is an accurate guide to its contents: Duchêne (henceforth ‘D.’) investigates the way two contemporary authors produced their surviving accounts of six emperors: Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius. She considers their historiographical objectives and the historical and literary resources available to them, as well as the time of composition, especially with respect to what the original audience would have expected from historiography. The central argument is that knowing how Tacitus and Suetonius wrote is crucial for reading their works properly. This essentially literary study has implications for historians’ use of these widely cited texts.

The book is neatly organised, with each chapter building on and offering a wider perspective than its predecessor. Frequent cross-references between chapters provide additional coherence. Overall, D.’s two authors look more distinct in the first three chapters, more similar in the last three, with Tacitus the more literary of the two, Suetonius the more research-oriented, but both aiming to produce portraits of emperors in an historical context that had blurred the boundaries between history and biography. Latin passages are translated, individual words are not. There is minimal reference to prior scholarship on the many passages under discussion here.

In the first chapter, ‘Tacite et Suétone dans leur narration’, D. reviews her authors’ differential use of some 300 explicit and implicit first-person verb forms, looking at how they describe the work they are doing: their claims of autopsy and access to first-hand accounts, their critiques of sources and anticipatory defences of their own work, their editorialising. Although she resists drawing any global conclusions from this material, there are interesting results along the way, as, for example, the observation that first-person forms of *memorare* and other words for the function of the historian are relatively more numerous in Tacitus, whereas Suetonius favours verbs that indicate his research process (28).

The next chapter looks more closely at ‘Mentions des sources dans la narration’, focusing on the expressions used (*tradere, dicitur, perhibere, vulgari, credere, opinari, constare*, etc.). A useful conclusion here is that her authors view their source texts more as raw material than as works comparable to their own, since they do not use the same vocabulary when talking about their own writing (86). More speculative is the conclusion offered later in the book that the absence of explicit Suetonian polemic against Tacitus’ earlier account indicates that he treats Tacitus as a source like any other (297).

In Chapter 3, ‘Interventions directes et mentions des sources: étude de la constitution progressive de certains épisodes’, D. looks at parallel passages in her two authors that can be read in light of introductory formulas about sources: Nero’s snakes, incestuous relationship with his mother, and fire, plus Tiberius on Capri. She asks how much responsibility her authors take for the content of their respective narratives and shows how they construct narratives such that a foundation of factual statements supports a superstructure of motives and other elaborations designed to persuade the reader to see the episode in a particular light. The next chapter, ‘Le trame et le motif: reprise des précédents et élaboration personnelle’, looks beyond what her authors say about their work to what we can deduce about it from literary history. The building blocks of ancient historiography are the focus here: type scenes (omens, births, deaths, accessions), themes (genealogy, spiralling violence), stereotypes (good general, tyrant, tyrant’s victim). The death scenes written for Vitellius provide an opportunity for a brief comparison (170–1).

Chapter 5, ‘L’élaboration du portrait de chaque empereur’, is the longest in the book, with its overview of the portraits of the six emperors common to what survives of Tacitus and Suetonius. These portraits, in D.’s view, were the historiographical objectives of both authors, vehicles for their views on the principate: ‘D’une certaine façon, ces hommes ne sont pas des hommes, ce sont des idées’ (235). Accordingly, she looks in detail at how Tacitus and Suetonius constructed their portraits, with due attention to spots where components refuse to merge seamlessly, e.g., where the historical record is at odds with the stereotype of the tyrant (for Tiberius) or the politics of the sources (for Claudius). She explains the similarity of the portraits in Nero in the two authors as the result of his structural function for both as ‘contre-modèle impérial’ (205), a function that Tacitus develops by creating a resposion between facets of the principates of Tiberius and Nero (e.g., Germanicus and Britannicus). Another sort of resposion obtains between Galba and Otho: as a living anachronism (210) Galba reveals how the principate itself had changed since the time of Augustus, even if he himself is a flawed standard-bearer for the *mos maiorum*, while Otho is the epitome of modernity. Once deconstructed, D. argues, the portraits complicate the search for historical fact. Gluttony, for example, becomes thematic for the portraits of Vitellius, permeating the narrative well beyond his banquets. In the final chapter, ‘La question du genre

pratique’, D. argues that the *Histories*, *Annals*, and *Caesars* should all be considered historiography by virtue of their historical content. In her view the centrality of emperors to any narrative one might write blurred the generic boundaries between ‘history’ and ‘biography’, though the narrative could be given different inflections depending on the author’s approach to his material and his aim in writing.

The book ends with a generously summative conclusion, a bibliography, and *indices rerum et locorum*. Readers of D.’s book will find here many sound discussions of the historiographical processes underlying texts fundamental to our picture of early imperial Rome.

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