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REVIEW–DISCUSSION

WONDERING ABOUT EMPIRE: TACITUS AND THE MARVELLOUS

James McNamara and Victoria Pagán, edd., *Tacitus' Wonders: Empire and Paradox in Ancient Rome*. London, New York, and Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. x + 281. Hardback, £70.00/$95.00. ISBN 978-1-350-24172-5

> To fall into a mystery and its danger … everything becomes so intense in those moments. When most mysteries are solved, I feel tremendously let down. So I want things to feel solved up to a point, but there's got to be a certain percentage left over to keep the dream going. It's like at the end of *Chinatown*: The guy says, 'Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown'. You understand it, but you don't understand it, and it keeps that mystery alive. That's the most beautiful thing. ~David Lynch[1]

Filmmaker David Lynch is famous for weaving mysteries that have no solution. The power of such an unsolvable mystery is its ability to capture viewers in an interpretive maze that continues long after the show is over. Lynch's success at creating such mysteries is amply attested in endless online speculation over the meaning of his works, despite his candour regarding his self-conscious aim to craft puzzles that ultimately have no definitive solution. Indeed, even Lynch fans who are aware of what he has said about mysteries in his work nevertheless remain captivated both by their desire to hunt for a show's 'real' meaning and by their happy refusal to accept that there is none.

One would almost think that Lynch was alluding to Plato's (*Theaet.* 155D) dictum on wonder being the beginning of all philosophy when he remarked on the intense feeling sparked by an encounter with mystery. Lynch, however, evokes something more Tacitean. To Lynch, the intensity of mystery, and I would substitute 'wonder' here, is to no small degree located in the *danger* it carries. The encounter with wonders jolts the experiencer into a profound sense of vulnerability that takes one's breath away, if only for a moment, and then fastens one in place searching for a way to reconcile disturbing perception and the assumed cosmic order, sometimes leading to a new vision of the world.

[1] M. Gilmore (March 6, 1997), 'David Lynch and Trent Reznor: The Lost Boys', *Rolling Stone*. See https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/david-lynch-and-trent-reznor-the-lost-boys-62337/

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As an active weaver of mysteries, Lynch wants something to remain unexplained and unexplainable to 'keep the dream going'. This reminds us that the deft spinner of literary wonders remains in control, knowing how, when, and to what extent the sense of wonder is deployed to achieve the author's ends. In contrast, the catalogue of wonders, or paradoxography, is a bottomless box of Twinkies into which countless wonders are stuffed, threatening to provoke nausea instead of inducing pleasure. Wonders may be more effective when placed in judicious dollops alongside other topoi. From the beginning of historiography, the right admixture of wonder in historiography was elusive. Thucydides (1.22.4) was unhappy with Herodotus' idle tales, a view that he arrived at partly through exposure to his predecessor's accounts of wonders. The imperial satirist Lucian (*Ver. hist.* 2.31) went further and consigned Herodotus to hell. As other wonders may do, Lucian's fictional hell sets a boundary or vantage point from which we exercise our critical faculties, while we remain entranced in the very exercise of comparison. 'At least I'm no Herodotus (so I like to tell myself as I reach for his *Histories*)!'

Where does Tacitus sit in this tradition of the use of wonder in historiography and, more widely, Latin imperial literature? James McNamara and Victoria Pagán bring us a collection of papers on wonders and wonderment in Tacitus, which finds its proximate cause in the conference 'Tacitus' Wonders' held at Victoria University of Wellington, 27–9 August 2018 (ix). The editors claim that the collection 'challenges readers to consider the role of the marvellous in the context of Tacitus' broader aims, and thereby to add nuance to scholarly understanding of the limits of epistemology—and decorum—in Roman historiography' (8). They also tantalisingly suggest that this focus on wonders in Tacitus promises to bring us beyond the steep divide between the exacting demands of modern historical science and a surrender to the hall of mirrors of literary self-referentiality (6). If such a volume should succeed, it would be a marvel in its own right. At the very least, it may remind us that cisgenred options are always staler than the curious range of tantalising options in between.

Before embarking on a closer examination of this delectable banquet of essays, I will provide my summary reflection on the collection as a whole. To read this volume is to 'keep the [Tacitean] dream going' by exposure to a collection of readings and ruminations that assists us in rescuing Tacitus and his work from dry assumptions about historians and their works. This collection prompts me to look beyond a Tacitus 'the historian' who deploys wonders expertly in the service of unfolding the past, and prompts me to ask, if only by way of thought experiment, whether Tacitus is teller of wonders who used historiography, ethnography, biography, and dialogue as his media for exploring the marvel that is the puzzle of the Roman Empire in its relationship with the wider world.

The genesis of such a Tacitus may find its roots in his first work, the biographical essay on his father-in-law, Agricola, which centred on Agricola's command in Britain, an island that inspired many legends and had remained relatively untouched by Roman *caligae* for a century after Caesar first landed troops on its shores. Among the wonders of the *Agricola*, none is more intriguing than the rebel cohort of Usipi that murdered its Roman attachment, took to the sea on three stolen liburnians, was reduced to cannibalism, and was ultimately sold into slavery across the Rhine (*Agr.* 28). In this fascinating story, Tacitus uses the word *miraculum* for arguably the very first time in his extant works when he describes how the Usipi were perceived by onlookers as they sailed along Britain's shore. Tacitus' account of the Usipi raises questions about the susceptibility of distant places and peoples to Roman control, perhaps suggesting that no matter how far Rome extended its power, something else would always elude its imperial grasp, causing wonder and setting certain bounds on the imperial experience.

If wonder is more or less the unwritten subtext of the *Agricola* that occasionally peaks above the surface in episodes such as the Usipian voyage, Tacitus' first large historical work, the *Historiae*, makes wonder its metatext. *Historiae* opens with a preface about the author's situation and views on the topic of imperial history (1.1), and then immediately launches into an overview of his chosen period that strains credulity (1.2–3). To modern eyes, Tacitus' litany of woe reads something like a space opera in which the prospects of survival in the face of such odds are vanishingly small. Implicit in the catalogue of catastrophes is the wondrous nature of the empire itself. The outcome is never in doubt; everyone knows that Vespasian established the Flavian dynasty and that Nerva took up the Principate after the assassination of Domitian. Tacitus' litany of disasters, in which even the gods themselves seem to be arrayed against the good fortune of Rome (*Hist.* 1.3), prompts one to marvel at the empire that could withstand such buffeting, such divine anger, and even frayed realities. The fact that the author has already soberly established his credibility heightens the reader's wonder at all that follows. It is all hard to believe and yet we know *it happened.*

This reflection on my reading of *Tacitus' Wonders* (TW) is an invitation to other readers to pick up this collection and savour its contents. If it has not yet enticed, perhaps a summary of the book's contents will succeed where reflection fell short. I ask the authors' forbearance for the imperfection of these selective encapsulations of their rich discussions.

In the first chapter ('Tacitus and Paradoxography', 17–51), Kelly Shannon-Henderson reminds us that ancient historiography from the outset included material that would not be considered history according to most modern definitions. Shannon-Henderson lands on a 'reader-response or cognitive approach' (19) to treating the marvellous in Tacitus' works that allows us to

consider how wonders spark in the reader certain kinds of engagement with the text. Tacitus used wonders to get his reader to ask questions about truth and falsehood in historiography but in such a way as to lean consistently in the direction of privileging the true/real in the strange. Unlike the paradoxographer, Tacitus sometimes includes explanations of wonders that manage, paradoxically, to increase the reader's sense of wonder. Other times Tacitus refuses to explain a phenomenon, such as the inability to plumb the depths of certain parts of the Nile, leaving the reader to wonder more deeply, partly because they are accustomed to a Tacitus who explains. In short, Tacitus has no single approach to dealing with wonders, but he always maintains his position as the authoritative guide in the readers' interrogative processing of the world he depicts.

Rik Peters ('Beyond *ira* and *studium*: Tacitus and the Hellenistic Anxiety about Wonder', 52–76) takes a somewhat different tack by proposing that Tacitus is consciously 'appropriating tropes and problems' (53) of wonder from the Hellenistic historiographical tradition. An anxiety over wonder exists therein partly because wonders are seen as winning out over truth in the contest for readers' attention. A further problem, and one that authors bear greater blame for, is the exploitation of readers' interest in wonders to seek popularity. According to Polybius, wonder rushes in to fill the gap when authors encountering the unfamiliar experience aporia. On the other side of the argument, represented here by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, defenders of the wonderful may claim that the envy of detractors is the cause of unbelief. Into this mix Peters throws Tacitus' concern to achieve a certain impartiality, on the one hand, and to train his readers to reject certain kinds of accounts through signposted negative examples, on the other.

Wonder remained an important ingredient in ancient historiography across the spectrum of authors and attitudes. The key to 'doing wonders' while maintaining credibility is to exhibit a judiciousness in reporting them. As Tacitus does in the narration of Drusus' murder and its accompanying commentary (pp. 69–70; *Ann.* 4.11.3), one can openly eschew sensationalism, while at the same time benefiting from its presence. His justification performs a function similar to *praeteritio* (cf. *Agr.* 10.5–6 and Shannon-Henderson, p. 24). Tacitus might have chosen simply to omit the lurid tale of Drusus' poisoning, but he got a lot more mileage from his wonder-lusting readership by including it, and he maintained his credibility as a serious author by making the whole thing a teachable moment in the commentary that followed ('I told you this so you would know what to reject'). The rhetorical trick is to convince your reader (and yourself?) that you succeeded in handling responsibly the situation your predecessors and competitors fumbled upon confronting. Polybius and Tacitus in any case understood that even sober historians must use readers' sense of wonder to maintain their interest in the narrative.

Arthur Pomeroy's contribution ('Wonders in Aper's Second Speech in Tacitus' *Dialogus de oratoribus*', 77–91) takes up Tacitus' discussion of orators and oratory in the *Dialogus* to raise questions about the lively contemporary exchange regarding wonderers and appropriate objects of wonder in Roman literature and speech. Pomeroy sees Aper as a more formidable and persuasive interlocutor than previously appreciated, who 'lands some serious blows' (79). He takes Messalla to task for principally admiring the orators of the past, when admiration is fickle and subject to bias and circumstances, as is evident in the preference of some for Caecus over Cato, for example. The waters are further muddied by arbitrary, fixed categories adopted by admirers of the old orators (*antiquorum admiratores*), when, according to Aper, oratory must evolve with the tastes of audiences, not insist on faithfulness to outmoded norms. Messalla attempts to trap Aper by making him commit the faux pas of listing the current worthies, but Maternus helps Aper slip the noose by observing that switching places with those we admire in the past would reveal the extent to which circumstances as much as individual character and talent invoke examples worthy of admiration. Pomeroy's Tacitus uses wonder in this argument about politics and oratory as a focalising mechanism that says much about the political posture of the admirer.

Brandon Jones ('*Laus eloquentiae* and *fama rerum*: The Paradox of the Socially Marvellous in Tacitus' *Dialogus* and *Agricola*', 92–115) plows in a neighbouring furrow, drawing our attention to the contrast between different instantiations of the 'socially marvellous' in the *Dialogus* and the *Agricola*. Jones sketches out a concept of the socially marvellous that has potential value beyond these two Tacitean works. The socially marvellous are those whose public performances and way of life elicit wonder in others. Among orators, according to Aper, the socially marvellous would be those who have achieved *fama*, *gloria*, and *laus*. The *Agricola* provides quite a different model of the socially marvellous in Tacitus' father-in-law, a man who achieved *gloria* despite his assiduous avoidance of inordinate (and dangerous) attention. The example of Agricola reveals a truth about the socially marvellous under a bad emperor: to be socially marvellous in certain endeavours is to be in constant peril. Jones suggests that the apparent paradox of divergent forms of social wonder may only be resolved through Tacitean historiography which can safely put the wonder of Agricola's life before the eyes of posterity. Jones' insights may help us better understand Tacitus' view of the role of the socially marvellous at the foundation of the Principate in the *adulatio* that drew senators to Augustus in *Annals* 1.

The second section of *TW* explores different interpretive strategies that are applied to the problem of wonders, while revealing the heuristic value of the wonders themselves. George Baroud ('Marvellous Predictions: Wonders as Metahistory in *Annals* 6', 119–45) examines a series of wonders in Books 5 and

6 of the *Annals*, which he treats as a unit that provides readers a special insight into Tacitus' philosophy of history. The first wonder is the False Drusus (*Ann.* 5.10), an impostor who pretended to be the son of Germanicus. Baroud sees Tacitus using this wonder to contrast Greek and Roman responses to wonders. In Tacitus' prejudiced view, Greeks are credulous and drawn to the fame of Drusus' name, while the Roman Sabinus carefully investigates the situation, gathering worthwhile data. Tacitus ends the episode by highlighting his own unwillingness as a historian to go beyond reliable data to say more about the episode than he had learned from the witness of Sabinus.

Baroud's second wonder is a series of accurate predictions by Tiberius and his friend Thrasyllus. Tiberius predicted the principate of Galba, while Thrasyllus had accurately predicted that of Tiberius, and Balbillus, Thrasyllus' son, predicted the emperorship of Nero. The series is kicked off by Gaius' marriage to Claudia, which Tacitus uses as an opportunity to describe Gaius' effective brand of imitative sycophancy. Gaius reads and imitates Tiberius successfully, ultimately enabling him to survive Tiberius' regime and succeed him. Baroud is correct to see the connection between T.'s description of Gaius and the divinatory scenarios that follow, as the most important skill in all these stories is the ability to read those around you and modulate your actions accordingly. Tacitus' subsequent reflections on fate allow him to reaffirm his critical distance while showing off the knowledge he is able to apply to questions of this kind.

In his account of the phoenix, Tacitus once again overawes the reader with the scope of knowledge and expertise of different kinds he brings to bear on the problem. Unlike impostor narratives that impugn the credulity of Greek observers, here Tacitus insists on the reliability of the Greek and Egyptian scholars whose knowledge he passes on to the reader. After reviewing the differing interpretations of Keitel and Woodman, Baroud observes that the truly important point to take away from Tacitus' discussion of the phoenix is that nothing is resolved. No definitive answers are proffered. The wonder is used instead to demonstrate the extreme difficulties inherent to the historical enterprise. Identity and chronology are so often uncertain despite the historian's ample sources and best efforts.

Callum Aldiss ('*Prodigiosum dictu*: Interpreting Signs and Oracles in Tacitus' *Histories*', 146–69) embarks on his insightful interpretation of two emperors' (Otho and Vitellius) and one future emperor's (Titus) handling of prodigies and oracles in Tacitus' *Histories* by pointing out that Tacitus' perceived religious cynicism is a product of readers' failure to take into account the correspondence of elite status and the correct interpretation of signs in the normative view of Roman state religion. Tacitus is not a cynic (in the modern sense), but one who exercises the critical tools that enable him to understand the difference between *religio* and *superstitio*. The *vulgus* are prey to their own *superstitio*, while successful emperors, possessing and deftly applying their

religious expertise (*religio*), are able to negotiate the challenge popular *superstitio* poses.

Otho founders by focusing on the prodigies that cause alarm in the *vulgus*, while neglecting to address the demands of *religio* by returning the *ancilia*. Vitellius seals his fate by failing to get out ahead of bad omens as good commanders do when they rationalise signs or issue favourable interpretations. He instead passively allows events to overtake him. Tacitus' account of Titus at Paphos reflects a new Flavian ideology marked by a convergence of *religio* and *superstitio*. Titus emerges from his consultation of the oracle buoyed up by its message, but he cloaks his oracular inquiry *per ambages* lest he undermine the Flavian cause and imperil himself. At the same time, the *vulgus* of the East are moved by *superstitio* to see Titus' arrival as a pledge of victory. Tacitus does not intercede but allows the fact of success to affirm retroactively the historical outcome of a dangerous development, namely, that the line between *religio* and *superstitio* can and will be consciously and deliberately blurred by those (Domitian) who should maintain the boundary between them. Looking forward to Haynes' essay (221–44), Vespasian's indulgence of the Alexandrians' *superstitio* in line with the advice of *medici* may represent the pivot point that leads to Domitian's abuses.

James McNamara ('Interpreting Wonders in the *Agricola* and *Germania*', 170–93) writes about Tacitus' use of two models of wonder in his works: the Aristotelian, wherein wonder is an inducement to philosophical inquiry, and the Lucretian, in which wonder emerges from 'philosophically informed insight' (170). Tacitus contrasts Agricola and Others (Britons and Roman soldiers) in their different responses to wonders to show how Agricola masters the challenges the exploration and conquest of Britain pose. In overcoming limitations through his intellect, Agricola appears to embody the Lucretian ideal of wonder deriving from intellectual insight. McNamara does not connect the dots between Lucretius and Tacitus through this portrait of Agricola, however, and some might like to see this aspect of Tacitus' intellectual development (including possible Plinian interactions) further explored. The *Germania* lacks a focalising perspective such as the figure of Agricola, and therefore, McNamara argues, wonders linger in the landscape. Tacitus instead uses his authorial voice to provide room for skepticism in his accounts of Germany's wonders. All the while, as Tacitus reminds us, wonder brings Romans and barbarians together in a kind of embrace of wonderment, where each side marvels at the other, defines the other, and also remains divided from the other.

Building on the work of Edward Champlin, who has written a handful of tantalising articles devoted to unraveling some of the mysteries behind *outré* anecdotes about Tiberius, and Emma Dench's observation regarding 'the proximity of the emperor to the wondrous' (205), Panayiotis Christoforou

(‘*qualem diem Tiberium induisset*: Tiberius’ Absences on Capri as an Inspiration for Wonder and Uncertainty’, 197–220) sheds light on the sense of wonder evoked by Tacitus’ depiction of Tiberius on Capri. The difficulty of extricating the historical Tiberius from the Tacitean Tiberius reveals something of the uncertainty that pervades his memory and even his world. Christoforou advocates pushing through potential epistemological paralysis springing from startling stories about Tiberius to embrace them as revealing something of the Roman imperial thought-world. Accepting that such tales are likely mostly fictional, we nevertheless encounter through them some of the tools Romans used to conceptualise their emperors and the nature of imperial power. In the cases of Augustus and Tiberius on Capri, readers are invited to consider interactions between emperor and place in a nearby but culturally interstitial atmosphere rife with marvels. Following Christoforou’s argument, one comes to see Romans imagining the island of Capri fully assimilating Tiberius to disturbing effect during his long sojourn there, whereas Augustus’ shorter visit to the same wondrous environment at the end of his life served as an appropriate prologue to the marvel of his death and apotheosis.

Holly Haynes (‘Tacitus’ Tragic Touch: Vespasian’s Healing Miracles at *Histories* 4.81–83’, 221–44) writes on Tacitus’ view of the Roman empire as tragedy come to life or depoeticised (221). Ordinarily, tragedy creates a space wherein the dangers of tyranny can be explored through characters such as Oedipus, whose literal-minded insistence on his self-sufficiency will not suffer, let alone take heed of, the deeper truths awaiting discovery in the poetic metaphors of oracles (a metatextual commentary on tragedy itself). For Haynes, Tacitus uses Vespasian’s healings in Alexandria to focalise the collapse of the literal and figurative in imperial ideology, thus becoming the genesis moment of the tyranny that would come into full flower under Domitian. One might say that Vespasian’s healings, refracted across a prism of space and time, recreate Oedipus’ encounter with the Sphinx. It is up to Tacitus, standing on the other end of a Domitianic chasm of overt tyranny, to use historiography to create a critical space where the lessons of tragedy can once again be taught in a climate that remains unamenable to them. Tacitus’ aetiology of Serapis showcases a priestly expert’s subtle and indirect explication of the lesson that through the Flavians Egypt gifted its theology of tyrannical power to Rome.

Victoria Pagán’s (‘Tacitus’ Ordinary Wonders’, 245–65) final chapter reflects on insights gained from the preceding contributions, solidifying the cohesiveness of the whole and exploiting its fruits. As an aside, it should be noted that this volume excels at bringing the different authors’ perspectives into conversation with each other. The editors are to be commended for facilitating a scholarly dialogue between the papers that yields a final product that is a book and not merely a *syllogē* of individual papers on a broad theme. That Pagán took careful thought in crafting a culminating essay for the

collection is apparent both in her choice to thread together the insights of earlier contributions and in her discussion of the relationship between the wonderful and the ordinary in the works of Tacitus. Tacitus, as Pagán shows, was an artist at playing the ordinary and wonderful off each other to make whatever point he felt the circumstances demanded. While recognising and memorialising the wondrous in the empire, Tacitus managed to foreground the ordinary in ways that made it, at times, even more marvellous than phoenixes.

To illustrate this point, Pagán revisits three episodes already discussed in the volume—the phoenix, Vespasian's healing miracles, and the cannibalism of the lost Usipi—carefully unfolding the ways that a subtler wonder is paradoxically both hidden and revealed in ordinary corners of Tacitus' accounts. The brilliant insight here is that most readers up to the present remain so overwhelmed by the spectacle of phoenixes that they completely overlook evidence of ordinary means working wonders. Right after his account of the phoenix, to cite one example, Tacitus reports the wondrous survival of Gaetulicus that resulted from nothing more than a carefully worded letter. What could be more mundane? Or is a carefully worded letter a mundane thing, after all (calling Tacitus from the world of social media)? Pagán then turns to the fine shades between normal (*solitum*) and beyond normal (*ultra solitum*) activities and behaviours that Tacitus deftly juxtaposed with their opposites to provide mutual illumination. Sometimes the usual ironically refers to emperors' departures from salutary practices in ways that demand remediation. The latter observation is a timely reminder.

Tacitus' Wonders is well worth reading and reflecting upon. More than just a collection of papers about the role of the paradoxical in the works of Tacitus, this book has a lot to say about Tacitus' efforts to grapple with the empire of his day and to work out how that world continually comes into being through Rome's internal and external struggles, evolutions, discoveries, and catastrophes (all mutually embracing in an intricate tapestry woven together in wondrous ways). Our continuing obsession with the Roman empire owes much to Tacitus' ability to draw us in with wonders through his reassuring but somewhat misleading pose of soberness and authority that belies his own struggle to understand power, politics, religion, and society in early-second-century Rome. Had we not trusted Tacitus enough to take him seriously, his work might have been tossed aside along with the treacly confections of paradoxography that Gellius (*NA* 9.4) grew sick of. It is because Tacitus so skillfully painted an intricate imbrication of alternating wonders and ordinaries, using one to shape our appreciation of the other in the finest of strokes, that we continue to pick up his work and marvel both at what he wrought and the wonder that was the empire he lived in. Whether or not one finds every contribution to this collection equally persuasive (I found none of them unpersuasive or unworthy of the whole), this is one not to miss, whether

your interests incline in the direction of imperial literature, intellectual history, ancient political thought, imperial religion, or Roman history. If you needed an excuse to keep the dream going, here it is.

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