

REVIEW

RENAISSANCE COMMENTARIES ON TACITUS¹

Kevin Bovier, *La Renaissance de Tacite: Commenter les Histoires et les Annales au XVI^e siècle*. Antike nach der Antike vol. 2. Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2022. Paperback, €64.00. ISBN 978-3-7965-4606-8. Available open access at: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/91945>

This book describes an important chapter in the history of ‘Tacitus before Tacitism’ and constitutes a complement to existing scholarship on, for example, the national receptions of Tacitus’ *Germania* and *Agricola* in the sixteenth century. Bovier’s systematic and carefully detailed discussion of how these commentaries approach their task not only draws into the light a genre not easily accessible or explored, but also provides an indispensable companion for any further research into these commentaries and the early modern reception of classical texts in general.

It is worth outlining the very specific organisation of the book first. The introduction presents the approach to the topic, the logic behind the demarcations of the book, a rough outline of the study of Tacitus up to 1515, and the biography and works of the editor of the first complete edition of 1515, Philippus Beroaldus. For his approach Bovier departs from the one developed by Valéry Berliencourt for his commentary on Statius’ *Thebais*, which distinguishes between four functions of the early-modern commentaries: establishing the text (*corriger*), establishing what it means (*clarifier*), explaining questions beyond the literal text, i.e., mostly the text’s connections and implications in its original context (*approfondir*), and finally giving moral instruction to the reader (*edifier*). This fourth function of the commentaries is not further investigated in this book. Next the six commentaries which are the topic of this book are introduced. Bovier explains his decision to limit himself to these commentaries by distinguishing them from the later (and more specifically political) ‘Tacitism’ of which Justus Lipsius universally counts as a chief figurehead. For this reason, Lipsius’ Tacitus-commentary of 1581 has been excluded from Bovier’s selection, and this demarcation leaves him with a neat corpus of six predominantly philological and historical commentaries written within a relatively limited period of time (1517–ca. 1570).

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Chapter 2 presents the bio-bibliographies of the six commentators and general details about the commentaries: those by Andrea Alciato (1517), Beatus Rhenanus (1533), Emilio Ferreti (1541), Vincent de la Loupe (1556), Vertranius Maurus (*ca.* 1560), and Giovanni Ferrerio (*ca.* 1568). Bovier also discusses paratexts such as dedications, addresses to the reader, etc. In the case of Ferrerio, for example, this provides a glimpse into the genesis of the commentary, and some more precise question with respect to it.

Chapter 3 discusses for each commentary how it approaches the exegetical tasks of *corriger* and *eclaircir*: sources and methods of textual corrections, and strategies of clarification. With respect to the correction of the text, Rhenanus appears as the most consequential actor before Lipsius. However a real ‘debate’ on the text between the commentators appears hard to discern, since as a rule they do not refer to each other’s emendations (with Vertranius as the exception). With respect to the clarification of the text, if we take Ferrerio as the example again, we see that he presents an *argumentum* to summarise a section of Tacitus’ narrative. At sentence level, he points at lexical similarities with other Roman sources, and clarifies the text by several different means: by adducing information from elsewhere in Tacitus and/or from other historians, and by re-formulating, thereby replacing words or phrases with different ones of his own that may also qualify or expand Tacitus’ wordings. Ferrerio’s annotations do not go beyond the factual level, and remain very close to Tacitus’ text.

Chapter 4 discusses the third exegetical task of *approfondir*, i.e., the clarification of the text beyond the limits of Tacitus’ precise words, in terms of, for example, historical or juridical context, religion, geography, etc. The approach here is slightly less systematic than in Chapter 3 but still compares the six commentators with one another. Bovier notes the preponderant interest in legal matters among most of his commentators, and their use of contemporary equivalents (e.g., to explain matters of monetary values, place names, and peoples). This is followed by a fascinating and important excursus (of twenty pages) on legal humanism and historico-legal debates. The opening statement that the ubiquity of legal matters in the *Histories* and *Annals* is rarely noted in modern reading of Tacitus is followed by an introduction of legal humanism as the sixteenth-century response to the ahistorical ‘Bartolist’ reading of Roman law. While the latter was understood as *mos Italicus*, legal humanism was seen as the *mos Gallicus* (thus producing an intriguing connection to a point made earlier that the commentaries all have a dominant connection to France rather than to Italy). Bovier points out that most (but not all) of the commentators were either legal professionals or showed a serious interest in legal matters. However, the application in legal practice of the results of legal humanism always remained limited; it was primarily a scholarly and intellectual occupation.

Chapter 5 begins from the observation that certain differences between the commentaries must be explained from the different (real or assumed) personalities of the commentators, and different intended audiences. The chapter focuses on the relationship between the commentators and their readers, real or envisaged. For example De la Loupe's commentary seems more directed at a wider readership including less experienced readers, whereas Vertranius' presupposes a learned reader with extensive knowledge of antiquity. In similar ways, for example different personal travel experiences or lecturing styles can be found shining through in the commentaries. Continuing the topic of readers, Bovier also looks at two sets of manuscript notes in printed copies of Tacitus: one in a copy probably owned by at least three people, where the notes seem to display a predominant interest in matters of morality; and one by one F. Robortello, where the notes display an interest in legal-humanist matters, albeit without reference to the commentaries discussed by Bovier. A long section of this chapter is devoted to the concept of *similitudo temporum*, examining uses of this concept in connection with notions of exemplarity and *prudencia* by the commentators.

In the conclusion (Chapter 6) Bovier returns to the connection with Tacitism and rightly argues (297) that the commentaries discussed in the book built the groundwork on which the later Tacitism could flourish: in order for Tacitus to become Europe's *magister in politicis*, the text of his works first needed to be established, clarified, and understood.

As noted above, the book succeeds admirably in its aim of drawing into the light a little-studied but fundamental body of sources. It presents a rich mine of information in a clear order and a pleasant style. Some of its choices could be open to debate, such as the decision not to include Lipsius' commentary of 1581, which is not political but philological and historical, just like the set discussed in this book. The political turn of Lipsius' interest in Tacitus came only in late 1586 when he started work on the *Politica* (published 1589). The Tacitus edition of 1574 and the commentary are in fact building directly on the work of Muret and Vertranius; it might thus have been more logical to include it with the set discussed here.

Bovier's focus is clearly on the particulars of each of the commentaries rather than on more general intellectual-historical insights. Nevertheless *La Renaissance de Tacite* contains several remarks and observations that open up promising alleys for further intellectual-historical research, such as those into the chronology and building materials of Tacitism, and its roots in the legal scholarship and practice of the age. However in this book these roads are mostly left to be trodden by other researchers. Having said that, Bovier's diligently constructed argument demonstrates once more the need for careful regional and chronological distinctions within the history of Tacitism, and will

provide both substance and inspiration for many future studies on Tacitus, Tacitism, and related classical receptions.

Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences

JAN WASZINK
jhwaszink@ihpan.edu.pl