Protean Readings of Tacitus' *Annals*

In 1513 or thereabouts Machiavelli wrote his famously influential treatise, *The Prince* (which was circulated only privately, but was not published until 1532, after its author's death). Two years later, in 1515, Beroaldus the Younger was editing, for the first time, the recently rediscovered Tiberian Books of Tacitus' *Annals* (Lowe 1929; Martin 2009). It is very unlikely – but not impossible– that Machiavelli had access to the single manuscript of *Annals* 1-6 on which Beroaldus based his edition, but since the 'Prince' Machiavelli describes in his treatise has an unmistakable 'Tacitean flavor' –especially of Tacitus' Tiberius– the two texts were destined to be associated in the political discourse of the next two hundred years, and received very 'flexible' interpretations. In fact, when Machiavelli's *Prince* was banned by the Catholic Church in 1559, Tacitus provided a convenient alternative for his 'Machiavellian' content (Schellhase 1976; Gajda 2009; Kapust 2012). Such a political interpretation of Tacitus, known as 'Tacitism', grew very popular up until the end of the following century (Burke 1969; Toffanin 1972; Momigliano 1990; Grafton 2010). While the political readings of Tacitus generated an immense literature of commentaries and treatises across Europe (Etter 1966), this genre did not begin to spread until the *Annals* received a systematic, philological analysis that helped establish its troubled text and explain the difficult Latin of its author. The credit for this goes to Lipsius, who edited the text in 1574 and published a complete commentary in 1581 (Ruysschaert 1949; Ulery 1986). Indeed the first political commentary on Tacitus, by Paschalius (1581), was based on Lipsius' 1574 edition (Momigliano 1949). In 1594, Ammirato's *Discorsi* explicitly linked Tacitus and Machiavelli. Thence 'Tacitism' was born.

Lipsius was probably the greatest editor of Tacitus before the modern era, but he is also indebted (at times without proper acknowledgment) to another giant of Tacitean scholarship,

Muretus (Marc-Antoine Muret). Muretus was the first to choose the *Annals* as a teaching subject. He defended his choice, which went against the advice of his superiors at the Vatican, by the extraordinary qualities of this text, since the *Annals* gave him the opportunity to teach his students Roman history, Latin grammar, and political prudence (Renzi 1985). In a time when Cicero's and Livy's Latin were still considered by many to be the 'standard model' (Whitfield 1976), Muretus' choice of reading Tacitus was seen as revolutionary (indeed his teaching appointment lasted only two years). Lipsius attended Muretus' lectures (Mellor 1995), and it is not unreasonable to see this as a key moment in Lipsius' interest on Tacitus.

In this paper I intend to illustrate the different layers of interpretations (historical, philological, pedagogical, political) that the *Annals* received among their early commentators, and to show that it was with the activity of a teacher that some of the most influential readings of Tacitus originated.

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