

The Characterization of Thrasea Paetus in the Tacitean Narrative

In an important contribution on Tacitus' life, Birley (2000) pointed out that Tacitus' full name might have been *P. Cornelius Tacitus Caecina Paetus*. In other words, the famous Stoic whom Tacitus so pointedly described in the later books of the *Annals* might have been a distant relative of the historian. If the identification is correct, it is not unreasonable to speculate that a very young Tacitus might even have met Thrasea at some point before his death in A.D. 66.

Unless new evidence emerges, this remains only a possibility. What is certain, however, is that Thrasea Paetus and all the men that belonged to his 'philosophical/political network' are extensively investigated in Tacitus' historical works (Syme 1991). The culmination of Thrasea's glory is famously celebrated in the vivid narrative of *Annals* 16, but Thrasea occupies a distinguished position in the Tacitean corpus from its very inception. Indeed in the preface of the *Agricola*, which marked the beginning of Tacitus' literary career, Tacitus states that his plans for writing a life of his father-in-law had to be postponed after Arulenus Rusticus and Herennius Senecius had been put to death for writing lives of Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus respectively (Woomdan 2014). There is every reason to believe that Tacitus was familiar with these biographies, and Arulenus' life of Thrasea is probably a major source for the later books of the *Annals* (Questa 1967; Bellardi 1974). In the *Agricola*, Tacitus does not approve of those who sought glory through famous—but in the end useless—deaths: his criticism is not, however, ideological. The *Agricola*'s focus is the life of his father-in-law, whose conduct was characterized by *moderatio* (and was indeed very similar to his own), and was very different from the open opposition paraded by Thrasea and his followers. It is therefore realistic to maintain that the disapproval Tacitus voiced in the *Agricola* was dictated by its subject-matter. In the *Annals*, however (and in the *Histories*, too, at least as regards Helvidius), Tacitus' attitude

towards Thrasea is overall positive, or at least sympathetic, though Tacitus does not spare some harsh criticism (Devillers 2002; Pigoñ 2003; Turpin 2008). Thrasea is mentioned prominently several times throughout Books 13-15, with carefully ‘staged’ appearances which underline his senatorial *libertas* and constancy before the obsequiousness of the other senators (Syme 1958).

What I want to argue in this paper is that Tacitus *uses* Thrasea to emphasize the gradual degeneration of Nero’s principate and its strictly-related senatorial servility (De Vivo 1980; Kearns 2011). Just like his model Cato, Thrasea’s exemplary behavior singles him out as a champion of *libertas*, and at the same time it characterizes him in Socratic terms as the last bastion of republican independence. When, at *Annals* 16.21 ff., Thrasea’s final moments become the focus of Tacitus’ narrative, the reader is subtly lead to compare the constancy of Thrasea’s principles with the deceitfulness of a senate who was hopelessly subservient to Nero and his *delatores*. Thus Thrasea’s suicide, which exceeds in its heroic elements even the famous suicide of Seneca, by which it is prepared, is used by Tacitus to mark a point of no return. This is the reason why Tacitus characterizes Thrasea’s death as the “extinction of virtue itself”. By killing Thrasea, Nero did not simply kill a man and a senator: he killed the ideals that Thrasea embodied.

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