

Thrasea Paetus as a Model of Resistance in the *Annales*

Thrasea Paetus has long vexed modern interpreters of Tacitus' *Annales*: scholarly opinion remains divided over how to reconcile the depiction of the senatorial firebrand with the impression of Tacitus' political outlook that emerges both in the *Annales* and elsewhere in his oeuvre, particularly in light of those famous passages where Tacitus explicitly endorses a policy of tactful moderation under despotism (*Agr.* 42 and *Ann.* 4.20). Thrasea's appearances in the later books of the *Annales* do not align neatly with such programmatic statements, and the difficulty is further compounded by Tacitus' apparently contradictory assessments of the senator's actions on different occasions. It is the object of the present study to show that Tacitus deliberately confronts readers of the *Annales* with highly contrasting portraits of Thrasea Paetus as part of a conscious didactic strategy. By presenting Thrasea at various times as both negative and positive exemplar, Tacitus conveys more emphatically to his readers what he considers to be an appropriate strategy for resistance under despotism, a strategy that, as I will argue, does not contradict the programmatic endorsements elsewhere in his work.

Previous scholarship on the *Annales* has generally striven to identify a consistent assessment of Thrasea Paetus throughout the work. So, for example, Heldmann (1991), Devillers (2002) and Turpin (2008) argue that Tacitus portrays Thrasea's actions as praiseworthy even where they would seem to contradict the author's political outlook elsewhere; while De Vivo (1980) and Städele (1990) detect negative qualifications even in those instances where Tacitus otherwise expresses admiration. In my view such attempts at imposing uniformity on the presentation of a complex character are misguided, and our understanding of the *Annales* will be better served by taking Tacitus at his word in each instance and asking what the purpose behind such contradictory assessments may be.

Thrasea Paetus makes a total of five appearances in the *Annales*, all in the Neronian books, but my study focuses on two passages in particular that I believe can justifiably be read alongside one another as contrasting setpieces of an exemplary nature. These are *Ann.* 14.12, Thrasea's dramatic exit from the Senate in the aftermath of Nero's murder of Agrippina, and *Ann.* 14.49, the senator's intervention during the prosecution of Antistius Sosianus on the first *maiestas* charge since the reign of Claudius. In the first episode Tacitus censures Thrasea Paetus for pursuing a course of action both dangerous and futile (*sibi causam periculi fecit, ceteris libertatis initium non praebuit*), while in the latter he praises the same senator for rousing his peers out of a servile lethargy (*libertas Thraseae servitium aliorum rupit*).

I begin my discussion by examining the intratextual connections between the two passages and their thematic significance within the *Annales* and Tacitus' oeuvre more generally. After demonstrating that the two passages demand to be read side-by-side, I go on to argue that they emblemize two contrasting strategies of resistance under despotism: broadly speaking, Thrasea's dramatic exit after Agrippina's murder represents the kind of *inanis iactatio libertatis* already censured in the *Agricola*, while his success in mustering a supportive majority during the trial of Antistius Sosianus demonstrates a savvy political pragmatism that effectively navigates the channel between *abrupta contumacia* on the one hand and *deforme obsequium* on the other (cf. *Ann.* 4.20). Finally, I will examine in more detail the characteristics of Thrasea's intervention during the Antistius trial in order to understand why Tacitus chooses this episode to hold up as a positive model for resistance under the Principate. To that end I suggest some ways in which Tacitus' presentation of Thrasea's successful strategy on that occasion corresponds to the model of political opposition articulated in James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

Tacitus' Thrasea confronts the modern interpreter with unique challenges but continues to reward fresh scholarly attention. It is my hope that the arguments presented in this paper will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of Thrasea Paetus in the *Annales* as well as providing further evidence for the continuity of Tacitus' political outlook throughout his literary career.

Bibliography

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