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Contents

The Use of Rumour in Tacitus' *Annals*

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Abstract

The Roman historian, Tacitus, is well-known for his colourful and dramatic narratives, which are observable in his juxtaposition of facts and motives. This is particularly manifest in *Annals*, and the style has brought the charge of anger, bias and error in writing history against him. This article relates how Tacitus' portrayal of his characters is evidently prejudiced by his experience of tyranny, corruption and decadence under Domitian's reign of terror, as well as how the training he received as a rhetorician accounts for the rhetorical and literary treatment of material to realise the objective of preserving the past. The article further notes that the historian scrupulously distinguishes fact from rumour to impress his viewpoints and judgment on readers' minds. Yet, his use of rumour as a literary device in expressing bias is considered an inevitable part of any historical work, as well as an effective tool in allowing the public to pass judgement on what may be missing in 'official' account or possibly wittingly or unwittingly tampered with by those in position of authority. Although Tacitus was not a researcher in the modern sense, the article concludes with a justification that he can still be trusted as a reliable historian who has not descended into wholesale fabrication.

Introduction

Tacitus historical writings are hardly reputed the best of his period, neither are they generally viewed today or accepted as the standard texts. Although his pre-eminence among Romans historian is rarely an issue, his sincerity in accomplishing the historian task of telling the truth has ever been found dubious, generating unending controversy among Tacitean scholars (Inez 1942:383).This situation could find explanation in the influence of Tacitus' background on his work (*Henry 1960:164*). While this article touches on how a historian's motive in recording facts about his nation, however noble it may appear, could be tainted by the events of his personal history, it further goes on to highlight specific use of rumour as a literary device by Tacitus who largely saw history as an art. Hence, here is a perception that the *Annals* could literarily be taken as a demonstration of the power of rumour in communication. Nevertheless, regarding Tacitus' approach to writing history, the article is neither an exhaustive study on the use of rumour in the *Annals,* nor a "dogged exploration of familiar avenues and a turning of well-turned stones" (Miller 1964:55). Rather, it is simply recognition of the place that Tacitus will continue to have in literary studies.
The historian's birth can approximately be put at A.D.56. What is known about his life can be derived from allusions in his own writings and the letters addressed to him by his friend and contemporary, Pliny the Younger (Pliny 6.16). Positioning himself in the Roman history, Tacitus relates: "I myself knew nothing of Galba, of Otho or of Vitelluis either from benefits or from injuries. I would not deny that my elevation was begun by Vespasian, augmented by Titus and still further advanced by Domitian..." (Tacitus *Annals* 1.1).Tacitus was likely trained as an orator by Quintilian, a leading orator during the reign of Vespasian (A.D.9 - A.D.79) (Mellor 1994:114). In *Dialogus,* which is believed to be the earliest of his works, Tacitus exhibits his zeal for rhetoric as he discusses the decline of Roman oratory, showing his preference for the earlier days of his country (Alfred J. & William J. 1942). The writer, in addition to demonstrating his passion for rhetoric, would also detach

himself from a society that produced him. Rather than identifying with the popular training and practice of the day, he engenders nostalgia for the intellectual condition of the tumultuous Roman Republic. However, the cheerful spirit in which *Dialogus* is written contrasts with *Agricola* and other Tacitus' later historical works; *Dialogus* apparently is not dominated by a grim point of view, and it is free of partisan tension.

The Historian and the Reign of Terror

After making some progress in rhetoric, Tacitus married the daughter of Julius Agricola who was once the Governor of Britain. From A.D. 89 to 93, he was evidently away from Rome on some official functions and possibly served as the Governor of the Belgic Gaul during this period. At his return in A.D. 93, he met the blooming tyranny of Emperor Domitian, the experience which he would subsequently relate even with rumours. Domitian's tyranny was so much felt by Tacitus that he later declared his father-in-law fortunate in death(Alfred John & William J. 1877), since that provided him an escape from the last terrible years of Domitian. During the gloomy days, according to Tacitus, no breathing space was left by the emperor who after throwing off all restraints, "proceeded in one continued course.... of fury as if determined to crush the Commonwealth" (Tacitus *Agrcola,* 3.44. 33 – 37).

Tacitus at this period of his political career, when he was almost due for consulship, witnessed an era of compulsory silence which is expressed thus: "... in this chasm which slavery made in our existence, we cannot be said to have lived but rather to have crawled in silence, the young towards the decrepitude of age, and the old to dishonourable grave" (Tacitus, *Agricola,* 45). When by A.D. 96 an unexpected release from this tyranny came with the death of Domitian, the historian expressed the effect of the reign of terror on his mind: "We witnessed the extreme of

servitude when the informer robbed us of interchange of speech and hearing. We should have lost memory as well as voice, had it been easy to forget as to keep silence" (Tacitus, *Agricola,* 1.1). With the experience of Domitian's rule of extensive overt violence and brutal killing that spread terror even among the senators vivid in mind, Tacitus published a biography of his father-in-law, *Agricola* in A.D. 98. The biography is clearly a laudation of Agricola for whom Tacitus had immense admiration. Notably, though, *Agricola* would also serve as a record of the past servitude perpetrated under the reign of a tyrant.

The use of *Agricola* by Tacitus to paint the picture of evils under Domitian can hardly be gainsaid. Mendell remarks:

> The man who wrote the *Agricola* could never be expected to write in a calm disinterested fashion, no matter how determinedhe might be to tell the truth without fear or favour. His interestwill be centred on the great political question which had affected hiswhole life and that of his friends. He will be a partisan (Mendell 1957).

However, the above statement contradicts Tacitus' perception of the lasting values of any historical work as stemming from its trustworthiness and impartiality, which the historian professes:

> When after the battle of Actium the interests of peace demandedthe conferment of all power on one man, there were no more greathistorians ..... at the same time historical veracity was impaired in number of ways, first through the writer's ignorance of statecraft as being another's business, secondly, through the passion of hatredagainst those in power ..... but the historian who professes incorruptiblehonesty must not write of anyone

> in a sprit of partiality or anger (Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.1).

Tacitus' statement here could certainly pass for a historian's determination to meet the requirement of a historian's craft, and with this definition of the nature of the task, he is expected to be factual and not be influenced by biases. Since primary sources were accessible to Tacitus, this should especially apply in his writing of *Histories*, an account of the events of his time. However, the historian's profession of veracity in *Annals* is clearly an issue. Tacitus largely derived information from the elders (orally) and the materials of previous writers for this work that mostly covers the periods before the historian, especially the time of Tiberius who died fifteen years before he was born. That the historian could not boast of any first-hand information of these periods is indeed a situation that may make a reader curious. Yet, conforming to the pattern of the ancient historians who often claimed that they were duty-bound to tell the truth and not invent; that there was no truth they dared not reveal and that they must not be biased by partiality or hostility, Tacitus declares: "It is my design to deal briefly with the end of Augustus' reign and then to treat the principate of Tiberius and the rest *without anger and bias*" (Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.1). Nonetheless, his use of rumours in *Annals* reflects to what extent he would go in expressing his resentment against the reign of terror.

Rhetoric and Predisposition to the Use of Rumour

After an earnest expression of desire to tell the truth, a reader of *Annals* would consider Tacitus to be an honest historian with avowed intention to promote veracity as far as it depends on him or as far as his perspective allows him, neither making any deliberate attempt at distortion nor relying or rumours to present facts. However, the immediate threat to his position and seeming contradiction is the admission he makes to a moral purpose in

writing history. Hence, the declaration of honesty may become a facade or formality, if not completely worthless, when the historian also expresses another intention: "to relate ... every motion ... conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history's highest function, to let no worthy action be un-commemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds" (Tacitus *Annals,* 3.65).

To reconcile the idea of a historian's duty to be honest and impartial with the above view of Tacitus is herculean, to say the least. His perspective highly predisposes him to the extremes of painting vices too black and virtue too white. It is not, and very much not, unlikely for him to be unfair in his selection of materials that would constitute the corpus of his history. Perhaps unwittingly, the historian identifies with the course of dwelling extensively on materials that fit his views of his characters or support his biases. His prime task as a historian then easily exposes him to distorting the truth (Louis 1925:179).

The trend in rhetoric and the concept of history as an art in Tacitus' time bears some consideration in understanding the historian's use of rumour that is given greater attention later in this paper. Roman rhetoricians equated historical and rhetorical training. This informs the advice of Quintilian to orators to write history on their retirement (Quintilian 12. 11. 4). In a similar vein, while Cicero saw mediocrity in the level of Latin history writing as resulting from deficient rhetorical training, he attributed the flourishing of Greek history to the place of rhetoric (Cicero2.51, 54, 55-57). Hence, Roman rhetoricians saw rhetorical training as preparatory to writing history.

Without fear of being hasty in judgment, any attempt of a historian to obey "rules" of rhetoric may undermine the ideal of the craft as a source of reliable information. The belief among Roman rhetoricians was that a historical narration must have the unity that belongs to a work of art, namely, a general *colour* that infuses it and unifies it to become organic. This simply requires the rhetorical skill of selecting an ideal typical character; the

hero, the coward or the tyrant, and bestowing the orator's typical ideal character on the character of the narration. Since Roman rhetoricians generally detested tyrants, when a tyrant is the ideal typical character selected, he is ascribed with qualities, such as cruelty, injustice, suspicion, craftiness and sensuality.

Another 'rule' of rhetoric is *argumentation*. More than logical reasoning, ancient rhetoricians would see this as putting forward an argument; making a bold assertion and persisting in doing so even when the risk of being mistaken is glaring. This harmonises with the third 'rule', appeal *to passion*. Quintilian urges his students to keep their narratives sufficiently embellished to stir up the reader's emotions. This means resorting to the chief powers of the rhetorician: exaggeration and disparagement. Quintilian argues that such embellishments should be "artfully made to appear artless, and here as elsewhere all bias and prepossession must be carefully disguised so as to make the work look original" (Quintilian, 2.17. 26 – 29).

Closely following the appeal to passion is *personal attack*. According to Cicero (Cicero *DeInventione*, 1 16-17, 24, 25, 25 116 – 17), to effectively attack someone who stands well, it is safer for the attacker to conceal his motive as he subtly undermines his target. He may relate irrelevant stories to rouse prejudice against his object of attack; his relatives or the circumstances of his past life could be mentioned if they would serve to alienate him from the public or cause some damage to his reputation.Theharm needs not be total; some brief mention could be made of strong points, while more emphasis is cleverly laid on the unfavourable ones. If there is any problem with clearly vilifying him, it is sufficient to note that he is guilty of formerly concealing his wickedness or that his evil nature was only budding.

The next 'rule' suggests how an orator deals with *hostile facts*. Admitting the fact may prove detrimental to the general

argument, while denying it is no less dangerous. Quintilian, therefore, cautions against an injudicious suppression. He advocates allowing troublesome elements into the narrative but planting landmines for their destruction. If this fails, emphasis can be manipulated; prejudices can be aroused by introducing irrelevances and applying other methods suggested under *personal attacks* above (Quintilian, 4. 2 66 – 67, 76–78). *Innuendoes* also have their place; they are relied on to rouse suspicion if that weapon is the need. A rhetorician may resort to vivid description of the enemy's personal appearance; how he is inflamed with wickedness and fury, how his eyes glare and how cruelty shows itself over his whole appearance (Quantilian, 9. 2. 29f).

The foregoing is just a brief picture of what the Roman rhetorician taught as applicable to historical method. More than aiming at the truth, they encouraged plausibility of any account presented. Hence, historians were taught to conceive and transmit whatever theycarefully *reasoned* had occurred and not necessarily what *actually* took place. This naturally predisposes a historian to striving to master the *art* of convincing or making whatever story they relate real to their audience. With the influence of the rhetorician, a historian would see his task as moralising and not just presenting facts. He, therefore, searches for acceptable arguments to support his meanings. Here, rumours may come in.

Some instances are now considered in the *Annals* to illustrate what Tacitus' experiences under the tyrannical reign of Domitian, the group of friends he belonged to and the training he had as a Roman rhetorician have challenged his paying more than a lip service to his profession of writing an authentic history; a history that has not been distorted by bias and partiality.

Moralising with Rumours in *Annals*

Tacitus' moral purpose in writing history has led him to stress aspects of history that conform to his conception of the

principate and individuals by the use of rumours. In *Annals* 1.4, he introduces his Tiberius by recording the "popular gossip [*fama*] of the large majority" (*pars multo maxima inminentis dominos variis rumoribus differebant*). With this anchor of rumour, Tacitus presents a gloomy Tiberius: *sed vetere atque insita Claudiae familiae superbia, multaque indicia saevitiae, quamquam premantur, erumpere.* [Tiberius] also possessed the ancient ingrained arrogance of the Claudian family, and signs of a cruel disposition kept breaking out, repressed them as he might). Similarly, he casts Augustus in a light that is, at least, different from that of other historians who gave accounts of Augustus' period.

After the use of rumour in another form, *multus hinc ipso de Augusto sermo* (many things are said about Augustus himself), in *Annals 1.9*, he relates both positive and negative things that are speculated about the ruler. This sets the stage for the uncomplimentary remarks that follow in *Annals* 1.10, where he prefaces bad motives he imputes to Augustus' military reforms with another variation of rumour: *dicebatur contra* (it was said on the contrary). With seeming detachment in making daring assertions, Tacitus succeeds in maligning the reputation of the emperor, since no one reading this account would simply dispel the information as hearsay.

Furthermore, with the expression, q*uippe rumor incesserat* ("for a rumour has gone abroad")(Tacitus *Annals*, 1.5), Tacitus reinforces the insinuation that Livia, the emperor's wife, is responsible for the illness of Augustus that worsens. Heachieves this when he strangely brings in the story of a character, Marcia, who claims responsibility for the death of her husband, and then Tacitus returns to accounting for the death of August. Here, the historian holds Livia accountable for Augustus' death "not only by recording the suspicion of others (thereby avoiding personal responsibility for the allegation) but also by including an accusation made about a completely different character"

(*O'Gorman* 2000, 93), leaving the picture of Livia's villainy clearly painted in the minds of readers.

Again, to portray Tiberius as a hypocritical character, Tacitus suggests that the appointment of Piso as the Governor of Syria is a plot against the life of Germanicus who has been sent to Armenia at this time. He uses the expression *Credidere quidam* ("some believed") (Tacitus *Annals*, 2.43)which is also synonymous with *fama* (rumour). The message of Tacitus is not ambiguous: "when Germanicus goes to the East he is a doomed man, [even] though the story of Piso's instruction is given only as rumour"(Henry *1950:64*). Although the historian credits rumour as the source of this notion, reaching the conclusion of a mischievous Tiberius is made easy with Tacitus' description of Cn. Piso as "temperamentally violent and a stranger to compliance, with the innate defiance of his father Piso"(Tacitus *Annals*, 2.43) of great nobility and wealth. The thought is fortified with the expression, *et erumpebant questus* ("There was too an outburst of complaint") (Tacitus *Annals*, 2.82)and then, *hos vulgi* (popular talk)(Tacitus *Annals*, 2.82).Tacitus tends to lend credence to the "popular talk"(Tacitus *Annals*, 2.82) and gives it the force of the truth by noting Tiberius' struggle to suppress it (Tacitus *Annals*, 3.6).

Interestingly, Tacitus, despite the tendency to influence his readers' judgment with the use of rumour, acknowledges that rumour is prone to "usual exaggeration" (Tacitus *Annals*, 3.44). Meanwhile, he accuses Tiberius of *inertia*(inactivity) because he preoccupies himself with "calumnies of the informers" (Tacitus *Annals*, 3.44) and disregards rumours. Tacitus, however, after registering the thought of *inertia*, presents what appears more acceptable explanation for Tiberius' approach:

> He [Tiberius] also gave the reasons why neither himself nor Drusus hadgone to the war; he magnified the greatness of the empire and said it wouldbe undignified for emperors whenever there was a commotion in one or two states to quit the capital the centre of all

> government. Now as he was not influenced by fear, he would be able to examine and settle matters (Tacitus *Annals*, 3.47)

Nevertheless, Tacitus would rely on rumours from the mouths of the citizens since this fits his characterisation of Tiberius as an irresponsible and hypocritical ruler who indulged in fooling the senate and the people. This is similar to what the historian does when trying to present a gloomy physical appearance of Tiberius. Although Drusus' wantonness seems to be the subject-matter, the historian prefaces his attack on the personality of the emperor with *varie trahebant* (Tacitus *Annals*, 1.76). Granted, he uses *non crediderim* (Tacitus *Annals*, 1.76);however, this picture remains vivid: "why Tiberius kept away from the spectacle was variously explained. According to some, it was his loathing of a crowd, according to others, his gloomy temper' (Tacitus *Annals*, 1.76). Tacitus' confidence in the effectiveness of rumour in communicating his message clearly manifests in his use of *fama constans ausum* (rumour remains intrepid) in *Annals* 6.30.

The few examples considered here on Tacitus' use of rumour, particularly in relation to Tiberius, can lead to the conclusion that the historian has made the desired impact on his reader by using the device of rumour to influence the reader's judgment and make him inclined to give full weight to Tacitus' innuendoes without his claiming responsibility for the authenticity of the statement as the writer. It is noteworthy that his biases are so undisguised that the sinister innuendoes in his work do not obscure the facts he obliges to record. While trying to fulfil a moral obligation in writing history, he is provably at pains to write what would later become the basis for sound historical conclusions (Lord 1925:179).

Conclusion

Since all facts are not always captured by data, Tacitus' use of *rumor* and *fama* could reasonably be understood as providing an opportunity for the public to act as the judge and draw conclusions on matters affecting their society. However, "to argue that [the] function [of rumour] is to document public opinion does not give the full story; ..., rumour is important because, the perceptions, whether true or not, are often a spur to action"(Gibson 1998:126). Tacitus' use of rumour possibly shows a deep awareness of this insight. The efficacy of rumour in communication, which the *Annals* exemplifies, finds expression in the following result of a research:

> Chinese are strongly collective, which means that informal channels of communications are important in Chinese society. In other words,Chinese consumers tend to rely more on word-of-mouth communicationbecause of the high contact rate among group members. Furthermore,given that informal channels of communication carry facts and rumour,Chinese consumers are **much more likely to rely on, andmake use of rumour from the informal channels, rather than what is actually claimed for the product officially** (Kindel 1982:99) (Emphasis added)

Even when the validity of rumours may be dubious, rumours have been perceived "as social facts from which people draw meaning and make decisions" (Harney 2006:382). They are sometimes, considered more dependable than "official sources which are seen as serving particular hidden interests"(Harney 2006:382) and are falsifiable. Although he expresses no intention of demonstrating this, Tacitus' skilful use of rumour as a literary device shows the place of "rumour publics" (Harney 2006:382) in creating "worlds as much as "facts do" (Stewart and Strathern 2004:188).

Clearly, the historian, Tacitus, employs the device of rumour to dexterously prejudice the reader and take no blame for whatever might be wrong with the opinion he plants in their minds. Yet, this he has done, evidently not in a deliberate attempt to mislead or falsify, but to recapture the prevailing political atmosphere of the period. The artful approach is characteristic of ancient historians and hardly fraudulently at variance with archaeology, epigraphy and works of other authors (Martin 1981:105). Hence, *Annals* will continue to remain a crucial part of available historical records to interpret the past.

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