

RHIANNON ASH, *Tacitus: Annals Book XV*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 382 pp.+2 maps, £ 24.99, ISBN 978-0-521-26939-1

With the great fire of AD 64 in Rome, the subsequent persecution of Christians, and the suicide of Seneca, *Annals* 15 features material whose interest transcends the specific disciplines of historiography and even Julio-Claudian history. The book also contains other events of major significance within imperial history, including the humiliating surrender of two legions at Rhandaia under Lucius Caesennius Paetus, the failed conspiracy of Gaius Calpurnius Piso, and the ensuing purge that eventually swept Seneca to his death. Tacitus narrates all of these episodes with his difficult Latin and integrates them within his complex historical vision. No commentary has been published on the book since N.P. Miller's student commentary in 1973. There has not been a scholarly commentary since Erich Koesterman in 1968. Henry Furneaux's commentary on *Annals* 11-16 from 1907 is still valuable. Rhiannon Ash, perhaps the preeminent Tacitean to emerge in the last twenty years and certainly the most productive, is well-positioned to provide a new commentary that reflects the approaches Tacitus developed over the last four decades. Ash's commentary, a Cambridge "green and yellow," successfully straddles the line between providing help to the advanced undergraduate wrestling with Tacitus' Latin and the scholar interested in the literary texture of the *Annals*. Some historians and more historically-minded readers may find Ash's focus on Tacitus' rhetoric at the expense of his interpretation of real people's actions and decisions at times unsatisfactory. There is no arguing, however, with her understanding of Tacitus' Latin and her explication of its relationship to the historiographical and broader Latin literary traditions.

The volume includes four maps, an introduction, a lightly adapted version of Heinz Heubner's 1994 Teubner text, and 280 pages of commentary. The introduction features sections on Tacitus' biography, the sources for *Annals* 15, the book's structure and artistry, the history of Roman relations with Parthia and Armenia, the characterization of Corbulo and Seneca, the Pisonian Conspiracy, speeches, style, and language, and manuscripts. I think readers will particularly appreciate the attention Ash devotes to filling in the historical background on Armenia and Parthia, along with two maps which provide different levels of detail on the eastern empire and Parthian kingdom. This is the fifth "green and yellow" dedicated to Tacitus' works and in the section on style, Ash reasonably does not aim for a wide-ranging survey of Tacitus' Latin but rather notes some distinctive features of his language in *Annals* 15 and points readers to other discussions in the series and elsewhere.

Ash very successfully supports advanced student readers as they attempt to translate Tacitus' Latin. Whether it is Tacitus' preference for combining the ablative case with the preposition *super* (76), or his penchant for using the dative gerundive to show purpose rather than the usual accusative following *ad* (70), or how the imperative in *oratio recta* is transformed into the jussive subjunctive in *oratio obliqua* (102), Ash carefully and clearly explains Tacitean idiom and places them within the context of either Tacitus' individual style or the wide variation that literary Latin allows. Subsequent appearances of constructions she has already explained are cross-referenced. Ash furthermore carries out the duties of the teacher. She takes the opportunity of a comment on *hortor* to explain both the range of constructions which may follow the verb generally and the Tacitean (and poetic) preference for the infinitive in particular (267). She also pushes students toward exploring grammatical and stylistic questions on their own with frequent reference to Woodcock, and Gildersleeve and Lodge, which may be familiar, and to Kühner-Stegmann, Leumann, Hofmann, and Szantyr, and Chausserie-Laprée, which may not be.

But to this reviewer, the commentary's greatest strength lies in the way it reveals the literary texture and artistry of Tacitus's Latin. Ash remarks upon and contextualizes Tacitus' language, especially his use of archaisms and poeticisms to reveal how highly artistic is the register of his Latin. The influence of the language of previous historians on *Annals* 15 is demonstrated from the first page of the commentary where Ash cites twenty-two Livian phrases in the opening six sections of the book (55). Elsewhere she notes that Tacitus ironically uses the rare Sallustian compound *praemineret* (15.34.2) to make the despicable and hunched courtier Vatinius loom over others (164). A note on the phrase *erumpentibus nostris* (15.4.3) educates readers about the historiographic convention of "polarising 'us' and 'them'" which goes all the way back to Cato the Elder (73). Ash consistently extends her analysis of Tacitus' language beyond historiography. For instance, her note on the phrase *saeviente pelago* (15.46.2) reveals both a direct correspondence to Seneca (*Ep.* 90.7) and explains the epic register of *pelagus* with reference to Lucan and Vergil (216). All throughout the commentary she identifies a great variety of literary figures Tacitus uses from anacoluthon and brachylogy to zeugma, all helpfully defined in the index.

No person appears in the text whom Ash does not amply identify and discuss. Indeed fullness of detail and discussion are the defining characteristics of the commentary. Here the perennial challenge of commentary-writing comes to the fore. At 280 pages, Ash's commentary pushes the word count to its maximum. What level of detail constitutes enough and does not spill over into discursive and distracting? In her note on the forced suicide of the direct descendant of Augustus and former consul, Silanus Torquatus, Ash goes on for half a page to describe the death of every member of his family

narrated in the *Annals* (164). Do readers really need an extended note on the fact that temple despoliation is taboo (210)? A helpful note on the technical sense of *corruptum* meaning to spoil when applied to grain continues on for several more sentences to describe grain storage practices and profiteering (116).

Saving a few sentences here and there would allow Ash to interrogate Tacitus's framing of episodes a little more. Nero's response to the great fire is a case and point (185–203). When I read of the relief effort in the *Annals*, even though Tacitus frames it as self-serving and sinister (Nero does not return to Rome until his own property is threatened by the fire and he takes advantage of the destruction to build the monstrous *domus aurea*), I see a fairly robust emergency response with shelter set up for those displaced by the fire, even on the emperor's own property, food shipped in, and grain prices frozen that is in tension with the narrator's voice (15.39.2). This tension becomes even more pronounced in Tacitus' discussion of the rebuilt city, where Nero's attention to preventing such a fire again by implementing a design of wider streets and shorter buildings among other things looks like an example of prudent urban planning (15.43). Yet Tacitus ends the passage with a sour note that the increased sunlight from the more wide-open city renders the environment more unhealthful. Nero's perverse and rapacious use of space for the *domus aurea* understandably casts a long shadow over the "deviant reconstruction" (193) of the city. But this should not prevent us from considering the information Tacitus presents that does not correspond to the acidic tone.

What gave me greatest pause, though, was Ash's frequent use of the term *topos*. I found it often raised more questions than answered. I was perplexed, for instance, by her use of the term in reference to a passage where Corbulo secures springs in the desert when he is putting his Syrian legions on war footing in response to Vologaeses' energetic leadership of the Parthians (15.3.2). Ash writes that "a general's obligation to secure drinking water for his soldiers is a *topos*..." (70), citing Polybius, the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, and Vegetius. Perhaps she writes this because Tacitus knows that historians writing about desert campaigns are expected to include such information or because he would expect that Corbulo would have secured access to water even though the historian did not have evidence for that action. I thought Tacitus included it because it signals Corbulo's cautious attention to detail. Regardless, securing water for military campaigns in the desert is a necessity, as the United States Army Field Manual for Desert Operations still states: "Water sources are vital, especially if a force is incapable of long-distance resupply of its water requirements" (FM 90-3.1-3). Focusing on the rhetorical aspect of recording Corbulo's action rather than the role the inclusion of the material plays in Tacitus' narrative is more dismissive than explanatory.

Ash's identification of many events as *topoi* reflects her emphasis on rhetoric as the defining feature of Latin historiography, an approach that owes its prevalence in scholarship in no small part to A.J. Woodman's work on the subject. And indeed, Ash cites publications of Woodman on his own or in collaboration with another scholar on nearly every single page. The scholarship from this perspective is deeply learned and sophisticated about Latin literature and it continues to demonstrate historiography's relationship to oratory and poetic genres but it is also reticent about what historiography aims to accomplish beyond offering an artfully constructed entertainment to its readers. The highly literary design of *Annals* 15 ultimately serves the interpretation of historical events.

While I occasionally found myself wishing that Ash would devote more attention to Tacitus' historical vision, I also recognize that a commentary's principle role is to assist readers one phrase at a time. The purpose of this commentary in particular is to facilitate reading *Annals* 15 and, on that score, it is a great success. Ash assists those struggling to read the *Annals* and more deeply informs those who are seeking a greater understanding of the book. Whether readers agree with every one of her interpretations of Tacitus' meaning does not matter so much as the fact that she puts them in a position of debating the question.

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