

## REVIEW

### SPEECH AND SENATORIAL POLITICS IN TACITUS

Ellen O’Gorman, *Tacitus’ History of Politically Effective Speech: Truth to Power*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. 219. Hardback, £85.00/\$115.00. ISBN 978-1-350-09549-6.

The world of Tacitus’ *Annals* and *Histories* is often perceived as a very dark one for the senatorial characters who populate their pages, who seem to have little or no field for effective speech or action because the political system under which they live concentrates power in the hands of the emperor. This view is challenged, or rather refined, by Ellen O’Gorman’s latest monograph, which argues that ‘Tacitus saw and presented in his works the possibility for a senator to engage in effective political action’, especially via speeches delivered in the Senate, ‘and that such a possibility becomes visible to us when we consider a senator’s action as having multiple aims and outcomes’ rather than assuming that it is always and only directed at the emperor himself (2). The book’s subtitle, *Truth to Power*, would seem to suggest that O’Gorman will focus on ‘dissident speakers’ who seek to resist the tyranny of the imperial system, but this impression is misleading, as the author herself acknowledges (2–3). Instead, she argues, ‘many speakers are far from dissident’, and we should focus on the ‘multiple addressees’ of their speeches; more often than not, ‘the conceptual positions of ruler and subject, as well as their ideal relations, emerge as by-products of the speeches’ ostensible aims’ (3).

O’Gorman’s major contention is that ‘thinking about the Principate as a regime of truth which is produced by discourses ... provides a space for considering the agency of imperial subjects’ (7)—that is, senators do have *some* field of action open to them, albeit one that is somewhat constrained. Tacitus’ narrative ‘perform[s] the double task of participating in and simultaneously critiquing truth regimes’, the critique coming through ‘his notorious ambiguity or irony’ (4). Yet it is misleading, O’Gorman argues, to read the senatorial speeches themselves as ‘figured speech’, speech acts that contain an element of, or leave open the possibility for, subversion or irony; ‘Senators are ... trying to do things with words, so their speech needs to be more proactive and for the most part more concrete’ (9–10). O’Gorman also reads the preface to the *Histories* (a key passage that crops up at several points in the book) *not* as figured

speech. Tacitus’ praise of Nerva and Trajan, she argues, is genuine, and suggests that historiography can ‘propose an alternative, a modification, or even a reaffirmation of the existing regime. What happens if we take Tacitus’ declaration seriously as just such a proposal?’ (11). Tacitus’ words *sentire quae uelis et quae sentias dicere licet* (*Hist.* 1.1.4), in evoking the formula *sententiam dicere licet* used to convene the Senate, show that ‘the *felicitas* of the historian ... is rendered concrete as the embodied experience of the senator’—hence Tacitus’ focus in his narratives ‘on senatorial speech as one of the primary modes of political efficacy’ (14). All of this, O’Gorman contends, is key to understanding the portions of the *Histories* and *Annals* devoted to chronicling senatorial business: they ‘derive ... from [Tacitus’] understanding of political agency as rooted in speech’ (15). While oratory is the place where Tacitus ‘grounds senatorial political knowledge’, he ‘posits history as the archive in which this knowledge can be preserved and transmitted’ (25). The shifting back and forth between figured speech and speech that is meant to be read straight—and particularly the unanswered question of why the *Histories* preface counts as the latter when O’Gorman wants so many of Tacitus’ narratorial assertions to be read as ironic (see further below)—makes the introduction the most difficult part of the book to understand. It does not prepare the reader well to understand the subsequent chapters and how they fit together, although the individual chapters themselves contain some valuable insights.

Part One of the book, ‘Modes of Speech’, comprises three chapters that examine flattery (*adulatio*), predatory accusation (*delatio*), and ‘counter-speech’ that offers resistance to both of these. Of these three species of senatorial speech, *adulatio* and *delatio* are identified as ‘the two debilitating modes of speech in the Principate’ that isolate the emperor from good advice and ‘constrain ... the subject’, while counter-speech, in resisting those two tendencies, ‘reassert[s] its truth-value’ and has the effect of ‘creat[ing] conditions of meaningful exchange with the ruler’ (81–2).

Flattery, the subject of Chapter 1, can be either coerced or unprompted by the emperor; ‘It thus illustrates the “co-production” of the imperial regime’ (32–3). While flattery is often associated with slavishness, it can still be associated with ‘innovative forms of speech’ as people find inventive ways to flatter the emperor, and is therefore interpreted as the evil twin of oratorical prowess: ‘Part of the damage done by flattery is in the way it “shadows” elite practices of formal speech and social exchange, emptying them of significance’ (33). In the proposal of honours for the emperor, O’Gorman argues, the Senate is actually not exhibiting slavishness but exerting its own agency, since ‘honours provide a discourse which *authorizes* the senate’; ‘the senate is therefore not a passive intermediary ... but an active mediator, a necessary participant in the creation of objects and ceremonials which perform imperial politics’ (48–9). The positive spin O’Gorman puts on flattery in Tacitus will not convince

everyone. She admits in her discussion of *Ann.* 14.64.3, in which Tacitus laments the sheer number of thanksgivings to the gods decreed by the Senate in response to Nero's misdeeds, that the historian's complaint 'presumes a context where honorific senatorial activity would be appropriate ... even though this ideal context is never fully present in Tacitus' narrative' (50).

*Delatio*, the subject of the second chapter, is similarly depicted as a perversion of meaningful exchange: it 'originates as a civic responsibility—the duty of reporting and prosecuting crime' which 'becomes increasingly focused on preserving the safety and dignity of the ruler' instead of the true well-being of the citizen body (55). O'Gorman introduces the idea of 'distributed agency'; for example, the attack on Libo Drusus in *Annals* 2 comes from four different prosecutors who 'are not necessarily working together' and are motivated by a mixture of personal enmities and a desire to curry favour with Tiberius (60). Recounting these trials thus allows Tacitus to 'explore ... the complexities of personal ambition negotiating between imperial and senatorial politics' (61) while absolving neither the emperor nor the prosecutors.

In Chapter 3, O'Gorman looks at moments of resistance to *adulatio* and *delatio*. For example, she views Tiberius' repeated refusal of honours as a 'challenge ... [to] the flatterers' implicit position—that the emperor is pleased to inhabit a world where his every action is shadowed by exaggeratedly honorific commentaries and gestures. Instead, he recasts their "embellishment" of him as offence and debasement' (86). In an interesting reading of Tiberius' Greek quotation about slavery at *Ann.* 3.65, O'Gorman argues that it 'can ... be read as an expression of frustration not only at the extent of *adulatio*, but at the absence of a critically acute audience for his rebukes' because 'his use of Greek creates a group of educated listeners from among his entourage' and 'makes a performance of Tiberius' routine departure from the curia, turning it almost into an act of protest' (86). Senators also try to resist *delatio*, thereby 'creating a space for senatorial speech which both engages with and holds itself separate from the harmful speech of the *delatores*' (105). One way this can be done is 'to hold *delatores* accountable for their past actions' (96), as Seneca's partisans do when going after Suillius (*Ann.* 13.43.3): in refusing to let Suillius hide behind the claim that he was simply following orders, the senators are 'resisting the way in which distributed agency can evade issues of accountability' (95). Another method is to 'engage ... with the process of judgement' by using the Senate's duty of sentencing to substitute an alternate punishment (e.g., exile instead of death) for the *delatores*' victim. Yet this does not actually end the practice of *delatio*, so in these cases senators are deploying their oratorical power to defend 'the safety of fellow citizens' but still 'conced[e] to the discourse of the *accusator*' because they never argue against the guilt or punishment of the defendant (101–2). O'Gorman demonstrates well how, even if Tacitus' senators are unable to really fix the problems of *adulatio*

and *delatio* in which they are implicated, they at least have a little room to work around the edges of these damaging forms of speech.

Part Two, ‘The Critical Archive’, comprising Chapters 4 and 5, was for me the more rewarding part of the book. O’Gorman’s concept of the ‘critical archive’ builds on Jonas Grethlein’s idea of ‘futures past’ in ancient historiography. When Tacitus describes senators giving speeches, ‘Both speaker and audience experience the moment as open potential in terms of what the speech will achieve and what it will make of the speaker’s career’, an impression which the narrator either ‘confirm[s] or undermine[s]’ in the historical narrative that follows. But whereas for Grethlein those ‘futures past’ are closed off, Tacitus, O’Gorman argues, by marking out the Trajanic era as a site of ‘open potential’ and ‘expansion of horizons’, reverses this: ‘The sense of experience which is embedded in the narrative invites the reader to participate in the political community of the past, but from the less circumscribed vantage point of the present’. This has the effect of ‘values’ being ‘recovered/maintained and their transmission ... secured by the very fact of their being shared across historical agents, historian, and readers’ (125–6). In other words, even if there is no room to change the course of events in the historical time he narrates, Tacitus offers his readers the opportunity to experience, through reading, the behaviour of senators of the past, which they can then imitate in their Trajanic present.

Chapter 4 deals with ethos and the orator. Tacitus, O’Gorman argues, ‘reaffirms the centrality and importance of speech but also brings focus to bear on evaluation and community’ and ‘promotes a concept of ethos and moral value as contingent rather than absolute ... The performance of ethos contributes to interactions which form a political community: the stakes of being a *vir bonus* concern both the self and the state’ (110). Tacitus does this by showing the emotions expressed by the speaker and how the audience reacts to these, and also ‘extend[s] community judgement to present and future audiences’ by interweaving the orator’s words with his actions in the narrative. Thus even if contemporary audiences were too corrupt to judge a speaker appropriately, there is still the possibility of Tacitus’ readership forming their own judgement after the fact. One example is Helvidius. In his abortive attempt to prosecute Eprius Marcellus for bringing down Thrasea Paetus, he elicits discussion of whether the prosecution would really be a good idea—so he ‘emerges with a different kind of ethos, invigorating debate rather than inviting the consensus of approval’ (132). Tacitus’ subsequent digression on Helvidius’ life, O’Gorman argues, connects him to philosophy and the general pursuit of the good; thus, even though his prosecution of Marcellus ultimately fails, Tacitus’ ‘digression presents Helvidius in terms of ethical values which transcend the particular achievements of Helvidius’ own lifetime’ (134). ‘Tacitus presents the historical judgement of [figures such as Helvidius] not to settle the question of their virtue once and for all, but in order to extend the debate about their efficacy into the present day’ (137).

Chapter 5 broadly covers the memorialising of famous men such as Agricola, Helvidius, and Thrasea by a ‘network of senators, which attests to a trans-generational passing down and reception of political principles’, which, O’Gorman argues, Tacitus uses ‘to construct a “genealogy of practice” which reaches beyond the immediate network in the present and the future’ (142). Thrasea and Helvidius are again a focus of the analysis. With Helvidius’ imitation of Thrasea, described as drinking ‘the drink of independence’ (*Hist.* 4.5.2), Tacitus ‘shows the transmission of *mores* through familial connections, shared philosophical interests, and common political commitments, but does not prioritize any one of these conduits over the others’ (146). Both men become ‘fertile models for imitation in the future’ (148); Asinius Gallus is read as ‘a possible illustration of Thrasea’s principle that a senator should make all issues his concern’ (152). Yet Thrasea in his turn was also imitating Lepidus, whose speech against the death penalty for Clutorius the historian ‘replays’ in Thrasea’s speech in *Ann.* 14.4. This is less a self-conscious imitation of Lepidus by Thrasea than it is ‘an oblique representation of senatorial traditions passed on through oral tradition’ and other similar means (155), and thus illustrates senatorial ‘practice passed on across the generations’ (154) in which the reader is also invited to share (153). The senatorial sequence in *Hist.* 4.40–3, where ‘the network of senators affected by the trial of Soranus and Thrasea ... [give] the impression of collaborating on the issue of the *delatores*’, is ultimately ineffective in producing real change but ‘is constructed so as to appear as a transmission of the principles, passions, and skills of the speakers into Tacitus’ own time’ (158–9), thus ‘prompting the reader to reflect on other potential realizations of what they find in Tacitus’ archive’ (163).

The two-page conclusion (167–8) does a disservice to the rest of the book by its brevity. O’Gorman highlights again the concept of distributive agency, the notion that in Tacitus’ world it is not only the emperor who calls the tune, since ‘constraints often emerged from discourses which were not *exclusively* controlled by emperors and other agents of imperial power’ (167, italics original). She also, perhaps more importantly, reasserts that Tacitus’ outlook on the place of a senator in the imperial system is not entirely pessimistic; the historian also looks to the future, for his ‘narratives pass on practical political knowledge’ and ‘explore the consequences of speech for the political worlds that we pass on to others’ (168). It would have been useful to bring these ideas into closer dialogue with research on exemplarity and exemplary history. If there is an overriding concept that unites the book, it is that of ‘immediate failure but far-reaching influence’ (156): while Tacitus’ senatorial orators may not get what they want in the near term, O’Gorman argues, the avenues they leave open for their successors, and the happier times Tacitus claims he is now entering with the accession of Nerva and Trajan, offer the raw materials for a reinvigorated Senate that has kept alive something of its traditional function and prestige. The picture that emerges from O’Gorman’s analysis is one of

senators’ continued commitment to political speech despite the constraints and perversions of that speech brought on by the principate, a commitment that is thought to include Tacitus and his contemporary readers.

I found myself wondering how O’Gorman would situate the ideas in this book against those of her 2000 monograph *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus*. Her earlier work offers a somewhat darker view of Tacitus’ text as a place where everything has a double meaning and characters and readers are forced to navigate minefields, whereas in *Tacitus’ History of Politically Effective Speech* there is so much in Tacitus that we are asked to read straight in order to arrive at the more positive, less constrained role O’Gorman is arguing Tacitus grants to his senatorial characters. In particular, her claim that senatorial speech is almost never ‘figured speech’ (10) is interesting in light of her former work and deserves further exploration. Still, the literary function of Tacitus’ portrayals of senatorial business and senators’ speech is certainly a topic deserving of more scholarly attention than it has currently received, and I hope O’Gorman’s book can inspire others to investigate the issue.

*University of Cincinnati*

KELLY SHANNON-HENDERSON

kelly.shannon-henderson@uc.edu