

GALBA AND PRIAM IN TACITUS' *HISTORIES*

This note concerns the use (or non-use) of poetry in Roman historiography. Some recent attention has been devoted to Tacitus' allusions to epic.¹ One monograph in particular argues for an allusion in the historian's account of the death of Galba (Hist. 1,35–41) to Priam in Book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid*.² This same allusion has been unconvincingly proposed by previous scholars, who cited tenuous parallels such as the extreme old age of the rulers and the abandonment of their decapitated corpses.³ However, two main contextual resemblances between these writers are newly offered in its support, and the uniqueness of these similarities is distinguished through contrast with the different version of Suetonius. Firstly, the emperor's arming himself and meeting the soldiers (Hist. 1,35,1–2) are said to be portrayed as nobler actions in Tacitus than in the account of Suetonius (Galb. 19,1–2), where Galba, unlike Priam, is allegedly 'resigned' to believing that all hope is lost, especially in the description of his arming: "Suetonius, we see, has Galba pointedly anticipate the *futility* of his defense, whereas Tacitus' Galba equips himself in earnest" (original italics).⁴ Secondly, emphasis on the theme of blasphemy in the setting of the assassination near a sacred spot, the *lacus Curtius*, is thought to be placed by Tacitus alone (Hist. 1,40,2): "only Tacitus develops this theme".⁵

1) See e. g. R. Ash (ed.), Tacitus: Histories Book II (Cambridge 2007) 24–5; ead., Rhoxolani Blues (Tacitus, *Histories* 1.79): Virgil's Scythian Ethnography Revisited, in: J. F. Miller / A. J. Woodman (eds.), Latin Historiography and Poetry in the Early Empire: Generic Interactions (Leiden 2010) 141–54; E. Manolaraki and A. Augoustakis, Silius Italicus and Tacitus on the Tragic Hero: The Case of Germanicus, in: V. E. Pagan (ed.), A Companion to Tacitus (Malden, Mass. 2012) 386–402. I wish to thank Stephen Oakley and the anonymous reader for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I follow the Teubner numbering for Plutarch's sections.

2) T. A. Joseph, Tacitus the Epic Successor: Virgil, Lucan, and the Narrative of Civil War in the Histories (Leiden 2012) 79–85 with bibliography. Joseph makes much of this supposed allusion, which becomes the basis for the whole rest of his chapter (85–112).

3) See esp. H. W. Benario, Priam and Galba, CW 65 (1972) 146–7; R. Ash, Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories (Ann Arbor, MI 1999) 79–80; E. Keitel, The Art of Losing: Tacitus and the Disaster Narrative, in: C. S. Kraus / J. Marincola / C. Pelling (eds.), Ancient Historiography and its Contexts: Studies in Honour of A. J. Woodman (Oxford 2010) 331–52, at 346–7. On the importance of a clear and specific echo (either of context or content) in establishing an allusion with certainty, see e. g. G. Kelly, Ammianus Marcellinus: The Allusive Historian (Cambridge 2008) 166–9.

4) Joseph (above, n. 2) 80–1.

5) Ibid. 81 n. 7; see also 82 (cf. 87–8, 111–12), where he attempts to revive the suggestion of N. P. Miller, Virgil and Tacitus Again, PVS 18 (1986) 87–106, at 100 that a verbal echo may possibly be found in Tacitus' phrase *foedare ... sanguine* (Hist. 1,26,1 ~ Aen. 2,501–2), but as Joseph himself concedes (82 n. 8, citing e. g. Ov. Met. 3,522), such language is common for bloodshed, and does not necessarily car-

Both points may be questioned. The description of Galba as ‘resigned’ in Suetonius is selective and misleading. In the biographer’s account, Galba merely intimates his recognition that the feeble armour itself would not withstand a military confrontation by a number of armed men (*loricam tamen induit linteam, quanquam haud dissimulans parum aduersus tot mucrones profuturam*, Galb. 19,1), not that he expects to die. We must remember that it is in this *Life*, not Tacitus’ *Histories*, where reference is made to the emperor’s *fiducia* (‘confidence’, Galb. 19,2) in meeting the soldiers, after he hears of an incorrect report that the rebels have been crushed. Galba’s reaction to this news even serves to portray him as overconfident in Suetonius, where the emperor’s arrogant question to the soldier claiming to have killed Otho, *quo auctore?* (‘Who told you to do that?’, *ibid.*), also suggests how out of touch he has been in his brief rule of the Roman people – the way his old-world *seueritas* has bordered on cruelty.⁶ If Galba accepts that his chances are slim in Suetonius, he is quickly made oblivious again with false hope, ironically recalling at his death the high expectations that preceded his doomed reign (Plut. Galb. 29,2; Suet. Galb. 14,1; Tac. Hist. 1,49,4). To say that Galba is resigned in Suetonius is not the full story.

Moreover, in depicting Galba’s view of his armour, Suetonius is simply developing the theme of Galba as a ‘defenceless old man’ (*inermem et senem*, Tac. Hist. 1,40,2) that was already present in his source (cf. Plut. Galb. 15,4; 16,4; 27,4; Plut. Otho 6,2; Dio 64,3,4²; 64,6,3), an emphasis which is also placed by Virgil himself through his references to Priam as ‘the old man’ (*senior*, Aen. 2,509.544), and to his ‘shoulders trembling from age’ (*tremantibus aevo / ... umeris*, Aen. 2,509–10) as he dons his armour.⁷ Mention, too, should be made of the fact that Tacitus’ portrayal of Galba wishing to wade through the crowd, were it not for his lacking the youthful strength, depends partly on Gabriele Faerno’s sixteenth-century conjecture of *resistens* for the manuscript tradition’s *sistens* (Hist. 1,35,1); otherwise, it is at least possible – albeit hardly preferable – to understand the word less valiantly in the sense simply of standing.⁸ At any rate, Tacitus’ greater focus on the noble dignity of Galba may be attributed to his concern for the tragic representation of the em-

ry associations of ‘gory sacrilege’ (82). The observation that the religious buildings surrounding Galba are more prominent in Tacitus is hardly new; cf. S. A. Frangoulidis, Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.40–43), Plutarch (*Galba* 26–27) and Suetonius (*Galba* 7.20) on the Death of Galba, Favonius 3 (1990) 1–10, at 3 n. 7 with bibliography.

6 See e.g. Tac. Hist. 1,18,3, with T. Power, The Servants’ Taunt: Homer and Suetonius’ *Galba*, *Historia* 58 (2009) 242–5, at 245.

7 See T. Power, Priam and Pompey in Suetonius’ *Galba*, CQ 57 (2007) 792–6, at 792–3, refuting the alleged allusion by Tacitus, though the article is oddly cited in its support by C. Damon, Déjà vu or déjà lu? History as Intertext, PLLS 14 (2010) 375–88, at 383 n. 13. Turpilianus is described as a ‘defenceless and unarmed old man’ (γέροντα γυμνὸν καὶ ἄνοπλον) by Plutarch (Galb. 15,4), seemingly to foreshadow Galba’s death; see E. Keitel, Plutarch’s Tragedy Tyrants: Galba and Otho, PLLS 8 (1995) 275–88, at 280; pace G. Morgan, A Lugubrious Prospect: Tacitus, *Histories* 1.40, CQ 44 (1994) 236–44, at 242, who thinks that Tacitus’ phrase *inermem et senem* about Galba derives from a reference to Turpilianus in the original source material.

8 C. Damon (ed.), Tacitus: *Histories* Book I (Cambridge 2003) 173 (ad loc.); Power (above, n. 7) 793 n. 7.

peror's final hours, since it lends drama and pathos to the opening book of his *Histories*.⁹ It therefore could equally not have its origin in Virgil.

The privileging of the *religio* of the emperor's death solely in Tacitus can also be discounted. Being killed near a sacred spot is not the same as actually being killed before the altars like Priam. However, the latter image is strongly evoked in Suetonius' description of Galba, who offers himself to the soldiers as a victim in religious language. The command *hoc age* uttered by Galba (Galb. 20,1) was the same one used by a priest during a Roman sacrifice when he was prepared for the assistant to hit the animal with an axe: these ceremonial words and the image of the outstretched neck (*optulisse ultro iugulum*, Galb. 20,1) signal the metaphor of a Roman execution staged as a sacrifice (cf. Sen. Controv. 2,3,19), and Galba thus frames his own assassination as an execution that is no less a perverse violation of Roman ritual, a sacrifice gone wrong.¹⁰ This language is not unique to Suetonius, but can be found also in Plutarch (ὁ δὲ τὴν σφαγὴν προτείνων, Δρᾶτε, εἶπεν, Galb. 27,1) and Tacitus (*plures obtulisse ultro percussoribus iugulum: agerent ac ferirent, si ita (e) re publica videretur*, Hist. 1,41,2). It was therefore almost certainly shaped by a common source, much like the image of Galba as *inermem et senem*. If the emphasis on the impiety of the soldier's crime was already present in an earlier source, then Tacitus' description of the nearby sacred buildings is more likely to stem from that source than from Virgil.¹¹

This new argument in favour of Tacitus' nobler and more religious account of Galba's fall thus seems like special pleading. There is nothing in the historian's death-scene even as tangible as, for example, his earlier words *annum . . . rei publicae prope supremum* ('almost the last year of the empire', Hist. 1,11,3), which possibly liken at least the year AD 69 more generally to the fall of Troy in Virgil (*sorte suprema*, Aen. 5,190; *suprema / nocte*, 6,502–3; *supremam . . . noctem*, 6,513). However, even in that line, Tacitus could also have had different precedents in mind, such as the Capitol's attack by Gauls in 385 BC (*noctis illius quae paene ul-*

9) See Frangoulidis (above, n. 5) 7 n. 17 with bibliography. On this aspect of Tacitus' work generally, see e.g. A. J. Woodman, *Amateur Dramatics at the Court of Nero: Annals 15.48–74*, in: T. J. Luce / A. J. Woodman (eds.), *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition* (Princeton 1993) 104–28 (repr. in: A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* [Oxford 1998] 190–217); F. Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor, MI 2006); F. Galtier, *L'image tragique de l'Histoire chez Tacite: étude des schèmes tragiques dans les Histoires et les Annales* (Brussels 2011).

10) Cf. Calig. 32,3; 58,2; with J. L. Brandão, *Máscaras dos Césares: teatro e moralidade nas Vidas suetonianas* (Coimbra 2009) 285–6; D. W. Hurley, *Rhetorics of Assassination: Ironic Reversal and the Emperor Gaius*, in: T. Power / R. Gibson (eds.), *Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives* (Oxford 2014); R. Ash, *Never Say Die! Assassinating Emperors in Suetonius' Lives of the Caesars*, in: K. De Temmerman / K. Demoen (eds.), *Telling Ancient Lives: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization in Greek and Latin Biography* (Cambridge forthcoming); T. Power, *Caligula and the Bludgeoned Priest, Mnemosyne* (forthcoming).

11) A possibility admitted by Joseph (above, n. 2) 92–3 n. 38; see also 90 on Tacitus' general fondness for topography; cf. 98–103 with bibliography, to which add R. Poignault, *Les fleuves dans le récit militaire taciteen*, *Latomus* 60 (2001) 414–32.

ma atque aeterna nomini Romano fuerit, Liv. 6,17,4), the death of Alexander the Great (*noctis, quam paene supremam*, Curt. 10,9,3), or the more contemporary eruption of Mount Vesuvius (*aeternam... illam et nouissimam noctem mundo*, Plin. Ep. 6,20,15).¹² The case for Tacitus' 'Priam-like' death of Galba, like the case for his Trojan *annum supremum*, remains weak.

Nor was Priam the only literary model for Galba that was available to ancient historians and biographers. Plutarch demonstrates as much when he writes that the soldiers impaled the emperor's head on a spear and ran around with it 'in the manner of bacchanals' (ὡσπερ αἱ βάκχαι, Galb. 27,4), clearly alluding to Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* – an allusion which suits Plutarch's invocation of the tragic genre in the *Life's* preface.¹³ Suetonius' version lays even greater focus on the abuse to Galba's head, but no connection with Pentheus is ever firmly drawn, and Suetonius instead alludes to Homer (Galb. 20,2 = Il. 5,254 = Od. 21,426).¹⁴ Indeed, Suetonius' portrait of Galba's end also alludes to Virgil's model, Asinius Pollio's famous historical account of the death of Pompey (as partially preserved in Plutarch and Appian), through the emperor's last words to his murderers: *quid agitis, commilitones?* ('What are you doing, fellow-soldiers?', Galb. 20,1; cf. Plut. Pomp. 79,1; App. BCiv. 2,85).¹⁵ Virgil was not necessarily the only, or even the most obvious, choice of precursor for Tacitus in writing the death of Galba. In light of the sacrilegious context we have discussed, when Tacitus has the emperor beg his assassins for a few days to pay the donative, and they care little for his words (*non interfuit occidentium quid diceret*, Hist. 1,41,2), one might also be tempted to recall Odysseus' abrupt beheading of the suppliant priest Leiodes, who is killed in mid-speech (Od. 22,310–29). But Homer's passage is never specifically evoked by the historian.¹⁶

In sum, although Virgil's general influence on Tacitus was perhaps underestimated by Goodyear,¹⁷ allusions must be pinpointed securely by a concrete reminiscence that cannot otherwise be explained as coincidental; cumulative cases can-

12) See C. S. Kraus (ed.), *Livy: Ab urbe condita Book VI* (Cambridge 1994) 194 (ad loc.); S. P. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI–X, I* (Oxford 1997) 540 (ad loc.); A. B. Bosworth, *Mountain and Molehill? Cornelius Tacitus and Quintus Curtius*, CQ 54 (2004) 551–67, at 554.

13) R. Ash, *Severed Heads: Individual Portraits and Irrational Forces in Plutarch's Galba and Otho*, in: J. Mossman (ed.), *Plutarch and his Intellectual World* (London 1997) 189–214, at 200–1; J. L. Brandão, *Plutarcho: Vidas de Galba e Otão* (Coimbra 2010) 33, 83 n. 93.

14) Power (above, n. 6); pace Brandão (above, n. 10) 286.

15) See Power (above, n. 7) 794–5. On Virgil's allusion to Pompey, see also N. Horsfall, *Pictures from an Execution*, in: J. Dijkstra / J. Kroesen / Y. Kuiper (eds.), *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (Leiden 2010) 237–47.

16) For a Homeric allusion elsewhere by Tacitus, see R. Mayer, *A Lost Allusion Recovered: Tacitus, Histories 3.37.1 and Homer, Iliad 19.301–2*, CQ 53 (2003) 313–15.

17) F. R. D. Goodyear (ed.), *The Annals of Tacitus, Books 1–6, I–II* (Cambridge 1972–81) I.325; II.86, 117, 200, 243–4; contra, see C. Pelling, *Tacitus and Germanicus*, in: Luce / Woodman (above, n. 9) 59–85, at 73 n. 31 (repr. in: R. Ash [ed.], *Oxford Readings in Tacitus* [Oxford 2012] 281–313, at 298 n. 35); A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge 2009) 6–7.

not pass muster, if their instances are individually weak.¹⁸ No matter how much the *Histories* of Tacitus may draw on Virgil in several other passages, such as the death of Vitellius (Hist. 3,84,4–85),¹⁹ its account of Galba's end need not be a direct allusion to Priam. There is no foundation of solid evidence on which to base that interpretation, such as we do in fact have in Suetonius (*quo auctore? ... ego uester sum et uos mei*, Galb. 19,1–20,1 ~ *noster eris ... quis auctor?*, Aen. 2,149–50).²⁰

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18) See Power (above, n. 7) 792; D. den Hengst, *Emperors and Historiography: Collected Essays on the Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. W. P. Burgersdijk / J. A. van Waarden (Leiden 2009) 96–7.

19) S. P. Oakley, *Style and Language*, in: Woodman (above, n. 17) 195–211, at 210 (cf. 196 n. 9).

20) For this and other clear allusions and references to Priam in Suetonius, see Tib. 52,1–2; 57,2; 62,3; with Power (above, n. 7); id., *Pyrrhus and Priam in Suetonius' Tiberius*, CQ 62 (2012) 430–3; cf. id., *Claudius' Homeric Quotation*, Latomus 70 (2011) 727–31, at 727–9 on Claud. 42,1 = Il. 24,369 = Od. 16,72 = 21,133.