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


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).


⁴) Ibid. (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, quamquam haud dissimulans parum adversus 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 severitas has bordered on cruelty.

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 64,3,4; 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’ (trementibus aeuo / ... umeris, Aen. 2,509–10) as he dons his armour. 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. 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-
peror’s final hours, since it lends drama and pathos to the opening book of his *Histories*. 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. This language is not unique to Suetonius, but can be found also in Plutarch (ὁ δὲ τὴν σφαγὴν προτείνας, Δραπέτε, ἐπεὶ, Galb. 27,1) and Tacitus (*plures obtulisse ultro percussoribus iugulum: agerent ac ferirent, si ita (e) re publica uidetur*, 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.

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 ulti-


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 tacitéen, *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). 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 dicere, 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-

14) Power (above, n. 6); pace Brandão (above, n. 10) 286.
not pass muster, if their instances are individually weak.\textsuperscript{18} No matter how much the \textit{Histories} of Tacitus may draw on Virgil in several other passages, such as the death of Vitellius (Hist. 3,84,4–85),\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{quo auctore?} \ldots ego uester sum et uos mei, Galb. 19,1–20,1 \textit{– noster eris \ldots quis auctor?}, Aen. 2,149–50).\textsuperscript{20}

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

\textsuperscript{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’ \textit{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.