Undermining the Caesars: Using the *Agricola* to Demonstrate Tacitus' Attempt to Protest and Subvert Roman Imperialism

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Introduction

Although Tacitus is known for his many publications on the histories and biographies about the Imperial Roman world, one who is a casual reader may not pick up on his sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant criticisms of Roman imperialism. Andrew Fear makes an excellent point when he wrote: “The *Agricola* is a complex text and it would be a mistake to see it dominated by one single narrative purpose” (Fear, 305). Tacitus employs a variety of writing techniques that range from ring composition to homage to sarcasm in order to express his views. This paper’s purpose is to show how in Tacitus’ *Agricola*, the author has a history of subversive writing (especially in his *Germania*) as well having the ability to creatively structure his writing style so as to not anger authorities in an attempt to undermine and denounce both Roman imperialism and its rulers.

A History of Subversion

The *Agricola* was by no means Tacitus’ first foray into the world of criticizing Imperial Roman values. His earlier ethnographic work on the German tribes, *Germania*, was one such publication. In order to fully appreciate the *Agricola*, it’s important to know that Tacitus established a pattern of subversive behavior in his writing. Although there are few passages that one can pinpoint as direct criticism, reading the piece as a whole yields almost an aura of admiration. He seems to praise the perceived German traits of strength and freedom and attributes these characteristics to their rustic simplicity. That is, he uses the ancient Roman virtue of agricultural sustainment and rural living and places that respectability on the German tribal way of life.

Tacitus mentions that the “people of Germany have never contaminated themselves by

intermarriage with foreigners but remain of pure blood, distinct and unlike any other nation” (Tacitus, *Germania* Ch. 4). Although it is entirely possible that the German people did not intermarry, it is possible that Tacitus is attempting to make a point about German culture. In fact, Tacitus could be making a larger point about Roman culture. The German people were living the way Roman fables say all Romans should have lived. They had not been corrupted by Imperial Roman ethics; instead, they live more like the previously mentioned idealized Roman. This passage could have also been a damning indictment on the increasing integration of other cultures into Roman society. By the time of the writing, native Gauls were serving as Roman senators and Trajan, a native of Hispania, had just ascended to the throne.

Tacitus also continues his theme of condemning Roman decadence. He says that cattle is the only form of wealth that the Germans hold dear. Again, this harkens back to the view that the true Roman should view agricultural pursuits as most noble. He goes on to say that there could be gold and silver deposits in Germany, but no one prospects for them, and he mentions that any vessels made of precious metal are used in the same way as their earthenware ones (Tacitus, *Germania* Ch. 5). Amber, a highly sought after luxury item by the Romans, is mentioned as being scattered along the German shoreline (Tacitus, *Germania* Ch. 45). The Germans, viewing the amber with the same disinterest as precious metals, are said to be surprised with how much the Romans are willing to pay for it.

The ideas he presented in *Germania* about the decline of high Roman moral values and the increase in decadence, savagery and the growing unchecked power of the emperors continue and are expanded in his *Agricola*.

Oddities and Ring Composition in the *Agricola*

The *Agricola* begins and ends in a rather strange fashion. Although the publication is indeed a biography of Julius Agricola (who is Tacitus' father-in-law) his name is not even mentioned until chapter four. Chapters 1-3 and 44-46 are searing denunciations of Emperor Domitian's reign and the negative effect it has caused on Roman identity and spirit (Ash, 20). Tacitus ends chapter one with the simple yet poignant line: "So savage and hostile to merit was the age" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 1). Tacitus means to say that in this Imperial age, many Romans are unable to advance in the same way they were able to in the Republic. This is, of course, relative, since similar social roadblocks were set up during the Republic, such as having to be a male, land-owning citizen usually of the patrician class. However, Tacitus is romanticizing the Republic in order to make a point: good men had the ability to flourish in a republican system of government. For a specific example, one could focus on one of the most important elements in the Roman way of life: the military. The general Scipio Africanus was able to rise through the ranks from a soldier to a general to defeating one of Rome's greatest enemies: Hannibal. His merit and skill as a military commander was rewarded with triumphs (which in the Empire were an exclusive right of the emperor) and even had calls to be consul for life. In Imperial Rome, this republican meritocracy is severely restricted and Tacitus examines this fact by posing the question: are good men able to exist under bad emperors?

In order to focus his biography of the Roman general on answering that question, Tacitus decided to present it in another peculiar way. Although Agricola lived 53 years, the biography focuses only on the time spent during his conquest of Britain and eventual governorship under Domitian (Ash, 21). The biography focuses, in a year-by-year fashion, on Agricola's successes within Britain leading up to the climax of the Battle of Mons Graupius and his victory over the

Caledonians.

In fact, this middle portion of the *Agricola* reads much like a Livian history with one obvious unaccounted for element: what was going on in Rome. The Roman historian Livy would structure his works by discussing events that were happening on the outskirts of Roman control (as well as the civil wars between Augustus and Antony) but would also counter this with events that were happening within Rome itself. Tacitus had an admiration of Livy, a fellow closet republican, and wrote that “Titus Livius, pre-eminently famous for eloquence and truthfulness, extolled Cneius Pompeius [Pompey, an opponent to Caesar] in such a panegyric that Augustus called him Pompeianus” (Tacitus, *Annals* Book 4). Tacitus remains silent about the home front until he focuses on Domitian and Agricola in chapters 39-43 and this silence is incredibly telling (Ash, 21). This obvious, yet subtle, nod to Livy only makes the audience wonder more about what is happening in Rome and serves to “maximize the contrast between the general’s freedom in Britain and the politically oppressive climate in Rome” (Ash, 22). Chapter 2, however, yields an uncompromising comparison of the Roman Republic and its current imperial system by denouncing the suppression of personal freedom. Tacitus says that the imperial form of “government imagined that it could silence the voice of Rome and annihilate the freedom of the Senate and men’s knowledge of the truth” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 2).

He furthers this condemnation by adding: “We have indeed set up a record of subservience. Rome of old explored the utmost limits of freedom; we have plumbed the depths of slavery, robbed as we are by informers even the right to exchange ideas in conversation” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 2). This kind of inflammatory speech is unyielding in its critical stance toward the imperial system. This is, no doubt, in direct opposition to Domitian’s stance on being the

political, economic, military, and cultural head of the state and his propensity to silence his opposition by means of death. Tacitus also directly references “Rome of old,” meaning the Republic, in this statement. He is drawing an obvious parallel to the great personal freedom that Rome used to enjoy and the terribly oppressive state that the Imperial system has wrought upon a once great people. He is also perhaps referencing the neutered status of the Senate by saying that Romans no longer had the right to exchange ideas. The Republican Senate had the ability to criticize the consuls openly in debate but such a thing was unheard of in the days of the Empire (unless one had a death wish), where the Emperor was either a consul himself or would install a puppet.

This hunger for ultimate power over the Roman state led to Domitian’s possible distaste for Agricola whose military victories far outshone Domitian’s modest successes during his wars with Germany. Although Agricola was not punished severely, he was recalled from his governorship, and Domitian did not see it fit to reinstate him in any governmental or military post despite his popularity and proficiency. In order to make this fact clear, Tacitus employed a technique used by oral historians before him called ring composition. Ring composition is quite common in Greek texts and is a way of storytelling in which the storyteller discusses topics until a climax in the middle and then begins to examine the same topics in reverse order, ending where they began. Tacitus uses this technique in *Agricola* in order to frame his biography on the larger topic at hand: the oppression of freedom in the imperial system of government and to answer his question about whether good men can exist in that said system.

Tacitus writes that “Domitian reacted as he often did: he pretended to be pleased when in fact he was deeply disturbed” (Tacitus, *Agricola* 39). This may account for why Agricola was given

high military honors by Domitian as well as having statues commissioned in his image but was forced into a quiet retirement due to the “emperor’s hatred of merit, Agricola’s own fame, and that deadliest type of enemy, the singers of his praises” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 41). Tacitus wrote that Agricola embraced this insult to his skill and prowess and humbly entered into retirement without a boisterous attempt to win glory. “He was modest in his manner of life, courteous in conversation, and never seen with more than one or two friends” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 40). This statement was meant to show that Agricola did not need the triumphs and rank that he deserved in order to be satisfied and happy.

Agricola then becomes the ideal Roman of old; one who finds reward and fulfillment in the successful victories of his job without need for pomp, fame and fortune. Agricola, like the exemplary Roman of the Republic would do, quietly lives out the last of his days on his estate in the south of present day France knowing that he served Rome proudly and selflessly. Tacitus uses his father-in-law as a model for what Roman life should return to and affirmatively states that indeed good men can exist under bad emperors.

Disparaging the Emperors

Tacitus’ unique writing style allows him to not only rail against the Roman system of government but also against the head of state. He utilizes many clever techniques that shield him from getting into serious trouble with the authorities. Tacitus decided in the *Agricola* to set his sights on, and attack, the harbinger of the imperial system: Julius Caesar.

Attacking the father (through adoption) of Rome’s first emperor is an incredibly risky thing to do and Tacitus decided to focus on the most insulting of subjects: Agricola’s superior knowledge of soldiery and tactics as compared to Caesar. An audience at that time would no

doubt have in mind Caesar's account of his British campaigns (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*) while reading *Agricola* and Tacitus presents Agricola as a man who was able to finish what Caesar was hardly able to accomplish (Fear, 305-306). In the text, he says "But he [Julius Caesar] may fairly be said to have merely drawn attention to the island: it was not his to bequeath" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 13). Belittling Caesar by saying that he hardly did much more than discover a new land mass reduces him to a mere scout rather than a great general. He further punctuates this point by stating that Britain was not conquered by him, and therefore he has no right to leave the island to his son, Augustus, and therefore to the Roman state. This can be interpreted to mean that Britain was not controlled by Rome until Agricola conquered the island himself. One could also argue that since all of the emperors wished to connect themselves by blood to Augustus, and as such they were attempting to connect to Julius Caesar, that Tacitus would then be insulting a family member.

Tacitus also alludes to the sea around Britain as being very treacherous. "Those waters, they say, are sluggish, and yield with difficulty to the oar, and are not even raised by the wind as other seas...that nowhere has the sea a wider dominion, that it has many currents running in every direction" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 10). This may not seem significant at first glance but it is important to remember that "Caesar's mishandling of his fleet was a major cause of his defeat in Britain" (Fear, 307). Tacitus is then able to emphasize how Agricola's fleet managed to navigate the dangerous waters that thwarted Caesar's invasion and successfully rendezvoused with his army without a casualty (Fear, 307).

The comparisons between Agricola and Caesar are not restricted to just military combat. Tacitus also compares the two in how they handled themselves after their invasions. In Chapter

21 of the *Agricola*, Tacitus describes how Agricola provided public works and education to the people of Britain. Rather than treating the vanquished as slaves, Agricola attempts to respect them by providing for them. This placates the Britons and establishes a peace throughout the land and they are said to go so far as to start wearing togas. However, Tacitus does not mention all of this without slipping in a slight against the Empire by saying: “All this in their ignorance they called civilization, when it was but a part of their servitude” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 21). This peaceful Britain is made to contrast with Caesar’s tumultuous campaign in Gaul where frequent revolts broke out after the initial conquest suggesting Caesar was not only a failed military commander, but also a failed politician and occupier (Fear, 315).

It also seems as though Tacitus employs sarcasm as a weapon against Imperial Rome. Although this conclusion is highly subjective as it is quite difficult to derive tone from text, the over-the-top nature of certain passages yield themselves to be taken as such. One such passage appears in Chapter 3 right after Tacitus lambastes the Roman state with phrases like “the conscience of the human race were perishing” and “as a former age had witnessed the extreme of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 2). Directly after such harsh criticism comes the following: “Now at long last our spirit revives. In the first dawn of this blessed age, Nerva harmonized the old discord between autocracy and freedom; day by day Trajan is enhancing the happiness of our times; and the national security, instead of being something to be hoping and prayed for, has attained the solid assurance of a prayer fulfilled.” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 3). Even without knowledge of the tone, the stark contrast of the two passages almost makes a reader laugh due to the ridiculousness. Using words like “this blessed age”, “enhancing the happiness of our times” and “the solid assurance of a prayer

fulfilled” directly after condemning the very thing he praises points only to Tacitus using sarcasm as another style choice in his crusade against imperialism. Using sarcasm is another way that Tacitus is able to vilify the Empire while also providing another important element: self-preservation.

It is without a doubt that writing critically about the emperor is a risky business. Other than shrouding his writing in sarcasm he also indulges in generalization in order to protect himself. It is important to remember that Tacitus knew Agricola quite well, as they were family through marriage, yet his biography of the man is standard fare that lacks any intimate or revealing anecdotes. Agricola is portrayed as an everyday Roman who is just trying to get his job finished as efficiently as possible under a totalitarian government and who is disinterested in heroics which may possibly get him killed (Ash, 22). This trait that Tacitus placed on Agricola “arguably mirrors what he himself did under Domitian, and thus serves as a form of self-defense by proxy” (*ibid*).

The Caledonian Speeches

Chapters 30-32 of the *Agricola* focus on a speech the Caledonian leader, Calgacus, supposedly gave to his troops prior to the Battle of Mons Graupius. The speech given by Calgacus is another hidden message by Tacitus comparing a people he sees as possessing important Roman values to the Romans themselves who have lost sight of what is good. In this speech, Calgacus then becomes a conduit for Tacitus to preach his own world views as well as to openly criticize Imperial Rome while still protecting himself by making his words come from a foreign king.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Calgacus’ speech, as opposed to Agricola’s response in

Chapters 33-34, is the advanced use of the Latin language. Calgacus' speech is "a masterpiece of Roman oratory" and employs many stylistic choices that were expected of a Roman speechwriter (Clarke, 105). For example, it is teeming with *sententiae* (brief moral sayings, such as proverbs) such as "the unknown always passes for the marvelous" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 30). While Calgacus speech is forceful, aggressive and packed with bold turns of phrase, Agricola's response is measured, factual and almost conventional in nature (Rutherford, 315).

Calgacus also possesses "the most Roman of virtues, *virtus* itself" (Clarke, 105). He is described by Tacitus as "superior to the rest in virtue and in birth [meaning nobility]" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 29). The Romans however, are said to be lacking in their virtue when Calgacus asks: "Do you suppose that the Romans will be as brave [*virtus*] in war as they are licentious in peace?" (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 32). This line also brings up Tacitus' continued unhappiness with Roman decadence since he mentions the promiscuousness of Romans while in peacetime. This could also refer not only to how the Romans act while they are not at war, but also in the heart of the Empire where threat of violence is relatively nonexistent. In other words, the Romans in Rome were constantly aspiring to a level of decadence and perverseness.

We are then given an interesting situation "in which Calgacus, the barbarian chieftain, is more skilled in the art of speaking Latin than are the Romans themselves" (Clarke, 105). While it would be foolish to say that Tacitus was siding with Calgacus over Agricola, it does further the complexity of the biography and make it seem as though Calgacus is merely a soundbox for Tacitus' manifesto on Imperial Rome (Rutherford, 315).

Perhaps the most famous quote in the Caledonian speeches is when Calgacus says: "They [the Romans] are the only people on earth to whose covetousness both riches and poverty are

equally tempting. To robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of ‘government’; they create a desolation and call it peace” (Tacitus, *Agricola* Ch. 30). This quote is significant because it describes the Roman style of occupation prior to Agricola. After conquering a nation, the Romans would take slaves and ransack the country while at the same time touting that they had liberated the people there and brought to the barbarians “civilization” under Roman rule. In other words, the Romans believed wiping out both a country’s people and property as well as their culture was their version of peace. Tacitus means to contrast this old way of doing things (again, the old *virtus*) with Agricola’s moderate way of ruling.

Conclusion

Tacitus’ *Agricola* is perhaps one of his most important works due to the uniqueness of its assertions and writing style. Tacitus is able to not only provide an endearing eulogy to his father-in-law by making him an ideal Roman but is also able to express his intense distaste for Imperial Rome and its totalitarian rulers. Agricola is described as the idealized Roman of the Republic and therefore should be looked up to and remembered. In fact, it was Agricola’s propensity toward moderation that led him to be a great man and could even be argued that “Agricola embodied a new type of *virtus*” (Clarke, 112). Tacitus argues then that Roman virtue should evolve from strength and brutality to a more moderate way of thinking, especially as the Empire continues to grow and integrate different cultures. The same could be said for the head of state; the emperors themselves should also be adopting this new *virtus*.

Tacitus’ *Agricola* possesses a perfect balance of praise and dread and he employs Agricola in both of those aspects. Although it is possible to read *Agricola* as an indictment of the man himself (especially his insulting comparisons of the orations prior to the Battle of Mons

Graupius), it is obvious by the end of the work that we must view him against the background of the time he was living in. “His admirable qualities as governor and general would be more at home in the (idealized) republic where merit and ambition received their due” (Rutherford, 319).

This paper has shown the many different styles that Tacitus has used in order to denounce the imperial system and condemn the emperors that rule over it. He has also chosen how to write Agricola’s life in a way that makes him a role model for Romans everywhere. His implementation of using foreign kings as mouthpieces for himself as well as sarcasm shield him from being charged with treasonous writing. The *Agricola*’s uniqueness moves this piece of work out of a generic biography praising the actions of one man and into a darker piece allowing contemporary audiences to read about a sliver of time in Roman history when writing the truth yielded horrible consequences and the Roman Empire wasn’t as glorious as it’s made to sound in pop culture.

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