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Timothy Howe ✦ Joseph Roisman ✦ John Vanderspoel
Pat Wheatley ✦ Sabine Müller



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Effectiveness and Empire in Tacitus' *Agricola*¹

Eric Adler

Abstract: Many scholars contend that Tacitus' praise for Nerva and Trajan in the *Agricola* was heartfelt: only as his literary career developed did Tacitus prove condemning of the Roman Empire as a system. This article, in keeping with Bartsch's notion of imperial doublespeak, argues against this claim, stressing that in the *Agricola* Tacitus can also be read as subtly undercutting the praise he included for the current emperors. It maintains that a key to Tacitus' implicit criticism of imperial authoritarianism in the *Agricola* rests on the matter of effectiveness. Unlike all other categories of Roman leaders in the work, "good" emperors lack the ability to be effective agents of change. The *Agricola* thus carries important hints that Tacitus, far from disdaining Domitian alone, can also be interpreted as deeming the monarchical control of Rome problematic under any circumstances.

This article, in keeping with S. Bartsch's notion of imperial doublespeak,² aims both to demonstrate that in the *Agricola* Tacitus undercuts his praise of Nerva and Trajan (3.1; 44.5) and to stress that in this work one can see signs of Tacitus' unease with the Empire as a system. It will contend that the *Agricola* offers signals that Tacitus' idealistic vision of Nerva and Trajan can be understood as a useful rhetorical maneuver for an author composing a work touching on high politics under the auspices of authoritarianism.³ In fact, the *Agricola* carries important hints that, to some of his readership, Tacitus, far from disdaining Domitian alone, deemed the monarchical control of Rome problematic *under any circumstances*. For obvious reasons, Tacitus needed to express such a sentiment subtly.

A key to noticing Tacitus' implicit questioning of imperial authoritarianism in the *Agricola* rests on the matter of effectiveness. This article will show that Roman governors in the *Agricola* possess the ability to shape the character of their subordinates, both for good and ill. To Tacitus, both "good" and "bad" governors can be effective. On its own, this conclusion should not surprise readers of the *Agricola*. But its importance stems from the *Agricola*'s markedly different treatment of emperors. In this regard Tacitus suggests that *only terrible Roman emperors can influence the nature of their underlings*—and only to their detriment. Emperors—

¹ The text of the *Agricola* used in this paper is that of Koestermann (1970). All translations are my own. I would like to thank Timothy Howe and the anonymous readers of *AHB* for offering many useful criticisms and suggestions. Thanks are also due to Arthur Eckstein, Calvert Jones, and Katherine Wasdin, who read earlier versions of the article and made many helpful comments.

² Bartsch (1994). For more discussion of this work and its influence on the present article, see below.

³ As Sailor ([2004] 153) has stressed, this praise, counterpoised with the author's contempt for Domitian, serves to co-opt the current emperors, to ensure their positive impression of Tacitus' text.

unlike governors—cannot be quick and effective agents of positive change. To Tacitus, then, an efficacious governorship depends on the character of the governor in question. An efficacious emperorship, however, is depicted as well nigh impossible: emperors, unlike governors, cannot quickly improve their subjects' moral malaise. Thus, the *Agricola* implicitly stresses (to some readers, at least) that the authoritarian control of the Roman provinces was appropriate, provided worthy governors such as Agricola were chosen for the task. The authoritarian control of Rome remained potentially problematic, however, even under the rule of nominally enlightened emperors such as Nerva and Trajan.

1. Praise or Imperial Doublespeak?

The preface of Tacitus' *Agricola* includes seemingly fulsome praise for the emperor Nerva and his adopted son Trajan (3.1):

Nunc demum redit animus; et quamquam primo statim beatissimi saeculi ortu Nerva Caesar res olim dissociabiles miscuerit, principatum ac libertatem, augeatque cotidie felicitatem temporum Nerva Traianus, nec spem modo ac votum securitas publica, sed ipsius voti fiduciam ac robur assumpserit....

Now at last the spirit returns; and although immediately upon the first rising of a most blessed age, Nerva Caesar mixed things previously incompatible—namely the principate and freedom—, and Nerva Trajan daily increases the happiness of our times, and public safety took up not only hope and prayer but the confidence and substance of prayer itself....

Close to the work's conclusion, Tacitus presents further commendation of Trajan, who now appears to be Rome's sole ruler (44.5):⁴

Nam sicut ei <non licuit> durare in hanc beatissimi saeculi lucem ac principem Traianum videre, quod augurio votisque apud nostras aures ominabatur, ita festinatae mortis grave solacium tulit evasisse postremum illud tempus, quo Domitianus non iam per intervalla ac spiramenta temporum, sed continuo et velut uno icto rem publicam exhaustit.

For just as it was not permitted for him [Agricola] to continue into this light of a most blessed age and to witness the rule of Trajan—which he predicted before our ears through augury and prayers—so he enjoyed the great solace of a premature death, to have escaped that last and worst time, in which Domitian no longer intermittently and at intervals, but as if with one continuous and single blow, exhausted the state.

According to many scholars, Tacitus' sentiments in these two passages were genuine.⁵ Tacitus, we are told, cherished the passing of power from the detested Domitian to his benign

⁴ On the possible date of the *Agricola*'s composition, see below.

⁵ E.g., Jens (1956) 332-33, 352; Benario (1975) 27; Shotter (1978) esp. 235-36 and (1991) 3274, 3321-22, 142; Schwarte (1979) 170-71, 173; Sablayrolles (1981) 60; Vielberg (1987) 26-7; Morford (1991) 3423; Tanner (1991) esp. 2723; Mellor (1993) 9, 111; Woodman (2012) 260 n. 9, 261-62, 271-76 and (2014) 84-88. Cf. O'Gorman (2000) 181-2, who disagrees with this impression.

successors. H. W. Benario, for example, surmises that when he wrote the *Agricola* Tacitus' "reception of the new age was sincere and heartfelt."⁶ R. Mellor agrees, contending that Tacitus' "praise of Nerva for having brought freedom into the principate shows his initial approval of the new era which Gibbon celebrated as mankind's happiest age."⁷

Such conclusions—which require an un-ironic reading of the relevant portions of the *Agricola*—fit well with another element common to much commentary on Tacitus. Numerous scholars suppose that the historian grew more pessimistic about the Roman Empire in the course of his literary career.⁸ Thus in the *Agricola*, apparently his first work,⁹ Tacitus had yet to grapple with the problems of the Empire as a system. He demonstrates in the work great antipathy for Domitian, but had thus far failed to recognize the congenital weaknesses of Roman authoritarianism. Rather, it was only as Tacitus matured as an historian that his misgivings about bad emperors (read: Domitian) developed into a broader and more intellectually sophisticated indictment of monarchical governance in the Roman world. This seems a popular view of Tacitus' development as an author, despite the fact that he did not turn to writing the *Agricola* until he was a politician of great experience who had managed to reach the consulship.¹⁰

Nor is this the lone problem associated with this view of the *Agricola* and Tacitus' purported development as a political thinker. In a book chiefly focused on the *Annales*, E. O'Gorman argued that irony and misreading are keys to understanding Tacitus' *oeuvre*.¹¹ According to O'Gorman, Tacitus, especially given his challenging Latinity, should be read as an author who cultivates false appearances and highlights the breakdown of communications in an authoritarian state.¹² "I find it difficult to believe," she writes, "that the ideal reader of Tacitus is not a skeptical reader."¹³ Decades earlier, in his magisterial monograph on Tacitus, R. Syme offered a congruent impression, contending that "It is the mark of political literature under the Empire, especially when it happens to be written by Cornelius Tacitus, that it should not carry its meaning on its face."¹⁴ Well before the linguistic turn, then, Syme was alert to

⁶ Benario (1975) 27.

⁷ Mellor (1993) 9.

⁸ E.g., Arnaldi (1945) 32-3; Klingner (1953) 26; Jens (1956) 337-38, 347, 352; Von Fritz (1957) 92; Benario (1975) 143-46; Soverini (1996) 37-8; Paratore (2012[1962]) 181-84. Others are critical of this perspective: see, e.g., Wirszubski (1950) 160-63; Büchner (1956) esp. 329, 331-32, 338-39; Christ (1978) 455; Schwarte (1979) 174. Cf. Shotter (1991) 3270-72, who contended that Tacitus detested individual emperors, but never the Empire itself; Mellor (1993) 103.

⁹ Although Sage ([1990] 854-55) and Turner ([1997] 582-83) argue that it is unproven, scholars typically deem the *Agricola* Tacitus' earliest surviving writing: e.g., Furneaux (1922) xix; Schwarte (1979) 174-75; Vielberg (1987) 26; Ogilvie (1991) 1715; Petersmann (1991) 1793-94; Woodman (2012) 257. Cf. Sage (1991) 3393. Murgia (1980) argues that the *Dialogus* was Tacitus' first work, a minority opinion among scholars of the *Dialogus*. On this topic, see also van den Berg (2014) 29-35.

¹⁰ Tacitus served as a suffect consul in 97 AD. On the prospect that Domitian selected Tacitus for this post, see Syme (1970) 15, 128; Shotter (1991) 3267.

¹¹ O'Gorman (2000).

¹² Ibid. esp. 2-14.

¹³ Ibid. 10.

¹⁴ Syme (1958) 29.

Tacitus' predilection for irony.¹⁵ Under such circumstances, it seems perilous to presume that the *Agricola*'s acclaim for the then-current emperors was sincere.

Insights from Bartsch's valuable book on doublespeak in the literature of the early Empire should encourage further doubts.¹⁶ Deeming doublespeak "the use of the public (imperial) transcript in a way that destabilizes the positive content of that transcript,"¹⁷ Bartsch demonstrates how some of Tacitus' readership could construe Maternus' unexpected praise for Vespasian in the *Dialogus* (41.4) as ironic.¹⁸ Such commendation, she demonstrates, has "dual meanings to its different audiences, pro- and anti-imperial."¹⁹ In short, what some readers take to be earnest praise can strike others as its opposite. Although Bartsch focuses on the *Dialogus*, she explicitly connects her conclusions to passages in the *Agricola* (3.1, 44.5) and the *Historiae* (1.1.4), considering the imperial flattery found therein kindred examples of Tacitean doublespeak.²⁰ Further, in her examination of Pliny's *Panegyricus*, Bartsch demonstrates that sincerity in Roman imperial literature touching on political matters was well nigh impossible, since even Pliny's obsessive attempts to display the earnestness of his flattery is undermined by the speech's concordance with imperial propaganda.²¹ The vicissitudes of political life in the Empire thus encouraged some readers to view expressions of acclaim for those in power in a completely different light.

There seem, then, to be strong reasons to conclude that Tacitus' *Agricola* at least complicates the praise it expresses for Nerva and Trajan. More generally, we have cause to question the conclusion that Tacitus grew increasingly pessimistic about the Empire over the course of his literary career. Still, though some scholars disagree with this impression of Tacitus' development as a political thinker, by and large they do not propose a rationale for their view, beyond expressing general incredulity that Tacitus, so pessimistic elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, in the *Agricola* would prove genuine in his optimism for the new order.²² If in fact

¹⁵ See also Liebeschuetz (1966: 134), who explicitly agrees with Syme's perspective.

¹⁶ Bartsch (1994).

¹⁷ Ibid. 169. Cf. 115: "characteristic of doublespeak is the appropriation of the ideological language of the court in such a way that, thanks to the peculiarities of the context it [sic] which it appears, allows its use to be understood as its opposite or at least as an uncomplimentary version of the original *although* this context does not irrefutably fix the content of what is said in one way or another for its audience" (emphasis in the original). Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.31.2) suggests that it was rather easy for emperors to divine when their subordinates were being sincere in their flattery. On its own, of course, this does not gainsay the importance of doublespeak to the author.

¹⁸ Ibid. 98-125, 145-7. For similar expressions of acclaim for Vespasian, see *Dial.* 8.3, 17.3. If, as a minority of scholars asserts (e.g., Murgia [1980]; Bartsch [1994] 122-3, 255 n. 37), the *Dialogus* was actually the earliest of Tacitus' extant works, it may very well be incumbent on those who believe Tacitus originally expressed optimism for the reigns of Nerva and Trajan to conclude that Maternus' praise of Vespasian must also be un-ironic. For a recent examination of the arguments surrounding the dating of the *Dialogus*, see van den Berg (2014) 29-35.

¹⁹ Bartsch (1994) 115.

²⁰ Ibid. 121-122.

²¹ Ibid. 148-187.

²² See, e.g., Wirszubski (1950) 162; Syme (1958) 220; Borszák (1996) 51; Christ (1978) 455; Edwards (2009) 158 n. 55. Cf. Hammond (1963) 103; Liebeschuetz (1966) 133; Syme (1970) 134-35; Sailor (2004) 153-54 and (2008) 58-9, 65-6. Leeman ([1973] 203) is an exception in this regard: he expresses a precise reason for his skepticism. To Leeman, *Ag.* 3.1 echoes Nerva's official propaganda, and thus must have been insincere. Woodman ([2014] 84) correctly contends that it is highly unlikely Tacitus would aim to seem so openly contemptuous of the emperor.

Tacitus problematized his rosy portrait of Nerva and Trajan in the *Agricola*, a persuasive argument to this effect that focuses on the *Agricola* itself has yet to be mustered. This article aims to present such an argument, focusing on disparities between Tacitus' impressions of Roman governors and Roman emperors to assert that some readers may reasonably conclude that the *Agricola* shrewdly undermines its fawning praise of Nerva and Trajan.

2. The Effectiveness of Roman Governors

To make our case, we must examine the categories of Roman political leaders found in the *Agricola* and the degree of effectiveness Tacitus accords to them.²³ Let us start with governors. Although our conclusions on this score may at first appear unremarkable, the contrasts between them and the *Agricola*'s treatment of emperors tell us much about the ways in which Tacitus signaled his early pessimism regarding the Empire. In the *Agricola* Tacitus highlights the influence Roman governors had on their military underlings and the native populations under their control. Including a topos also found in Livy (5.28.4), Tacitus implicitly presumes that peoples take on the character of their leaders. This shines through most clearly in Tacitus' extended discussion of Agricola's governorship. Tacitus explains his father-in-law's commencement of duties as follows (18.1-2):

Hunc Britanniae statum, has bellorum vices media iam aestate transgressus Agricola invenit, cum et milites velut omissa expeditione ad securitatem et hostes ad occasionem verterentur. Ordovicum civitas haud multo ante adventum eius alam in finibus suis agentem prope universam obtriverat, eoque initio erecta provincia. Et quibus bellum volentibus erat, probare exemplum ac recentis legati animum opperiri, cum Agricola, quamquam trasvecta aestas, sparsi per provinciam numeri, praesumpta aput militem illius anni quies, tarda et contraria bellum inchoaturo, et plerisque custodiri suspecta potius videbatur, ire obviam discrimini statuit; contractisque legionum vexillis et modica auxiliorum manu, quia in aequum degredi Ordovices non audebant, ipse ante agmen, quo ceteris par animus simili periculo esset, erexit aciem.

Agricola, having gone across now in the middle of the summer, found Britain in this condition and these successions of wars, when both the soldiers, as if an expedition had been abandoned, were turning their attention to their safety, and the enemy was turning its attention to an opportunity. Not much before Agricola's arrival, the tribe of the Ordovices had annihilated nearly an entire cavalry regiment operating within its borders, and this start had excited the province. Those hoping for war approved of this example and were determining the sensibility of the new governor, when Agricola, although the summer had passed, the units were scattered throughout the province, the soldiers anticipated a rest for that year (slow and inimical circumstances for a

Bartsch ([1994] 122-23) argues that it is "dangerous" to argue that Tacitus' praise for the emperors in the *Agricola* is sincere, since Tacitus' work consistently demonstrates the falsity of "imperial ideology." The present article in part builds on this insight.

²³ Tacitus, like Roman historians more generally, typically viewed great leaders as the drivers of historical change. This seems a consistent element of a historical tradition composed almost exclusively of members of the Roman elite.

governor aiming to begin a war), and many deemed it preferable merely to guard suspect places, determined to confront the danger; and with detachments of the legions and a small band of auxiliaries drawn together, since the Ordovices did not dare to descend to level ground, he himself set up the battle line before the column, in order that the other men might take equal courage in a similar danger.

Upon Agricola's arrival in the province, many Britons hoped to foment an uprising, and the Roman soldiers expected a remission from fighting. But Agricola, ever the able leader, compelled his troops to face this menace—and they quickly prospered, almost eradicating the entire tribe of the Ordovices (18.3), and successfully invading the island of Mona (18.5).

Recognizing the impetus behind the rebellion, Tacitus' Agricola set out to alter Roman conduct and practices in Britain (19.1), in part through lowering rates of taxation (19.4) and choosing appropriate subordinates on his staff (19.2-3). Tacitus informs us of the results of such actions (20.1): *Haec primo statim anno comprimendo egregiam famam paci circumdedit, quae vel incuria vel intolerantia priorum haud minus quam bellum timebatur* ("Through restraining these things immediately within his first year he bestowed a distinguished reputation on peace, which was now being feared just as much as war either because of the inattention or the arrogance of earlier governors"). Right away, in less than one year (*primo statim anno*), then, Agricola turned bellicose provincials into irenic subjects. To cement these gains, he instilled a sense of discipline in his soldiers (20.2).

In all this, Tacitus stresses that Agricola worked fast: although he had inherited a less than perfect province from his predecessors,²⁴ it was a mark of his strengths as a Roman governor that he quickly improved conditions in Britain, transforming volatile tribesmen into docile subalterns eager to take on the trappings of Romanness (21.1-2). Little time was required for these metamorphoses, and Tacitus offers no signs of lingering effects on the newly quiescent underlings. Agricola's peerless leadership, Tacitus implies, can be witnessed in the character of his subordinates. He was, in short, an efficient agent of positive change in Britain.

And Tacitus does not imply that only superior governors such as Agricola can prove effective in shaping their subordinates. The same holds true in the *Agricola* for those less skilled. M. Trebellius Maximus' term of service provides a salient example.²⁵ Tacitus relates (16.3-4):

Missus igitur Petronius Turpilianus tamquam exorabilior et delictis hostium novus eoque paenitentiae mitior, compositis prioribus nihil ultra ausus Trebellio Maximo provinciam tradidit. Trebellius segnior et nullis castrorum experimentis, comitate quadam curandi provinciam tenuit. Didicere iam barbari quoque ignoscere vitiis blandientibus, et interventus civilium armorum praebuit iustam segnitiae excusationem; sed discordia laboratum, cum adsuetus expeditionibus miles otio lasciviret. Trebellius, fuga ac latebris vitata exercitus ira indecorus atque humilis, precario mox praefuit, ac velut pacta exercitus licentia ducis salute, [et] seditio sine sanguine stetit.

²⁴ Scholars have long recognized that Tacitus underplayed the successes of Agricola's predecessors in order to make his father-in-law's leadership seem even more praiseworthy. On this score, see, e.g., McGing (1982) 16-20; Woodman (2014) 159.

²⁵ On Trebellius' governorship, which lasted from 63-69 AD, see Birley (2005) 52-6.

Therefore Petronius Turpilianus, who had been sent because he was more placable and new to the wrongs of the enemies, and for that reason milder in regard to repentance, with the earlier matters arranged, having not dared to do anything besides, handed the province over to Trebellius Maximus. Trebellius, more lethargic and lacking any military experience, controlled the province with a certain graciousness of commanding. Now the barbarians also learned to pardon pleasing vices, and the outbreak of civil war offered a legitimate excuse for lethargy: but the province suffered from mutiny, since the soldiery, accustomed to military expeditions, ran riot because of its leisure. Trebellius, ignominious and abject, having avoided his army's anger through flight and hiding places, soon was in command by their permission, as if the army's license had been arranged as recompense for the leader's safety, and the mutiny came to a stop without bloodshed.

Trebellius' easy-going indolence had ill effects on both his soldiers and the provincials. The former quickly grew mutinous, the latter dissolute. As was the case with the superior governorship of Agricola, the subordinates in Britain, whether Roman or barbarian, mirrored the characteristics of their leader. In this case, a lax governor bred rebellious—and ultimately passive—soldiers and louche provincials. Again, Tacitus assumes that a governor possessed complete control over his charges; Trebellius' inexperience and defects of character led him to craft problematic underlings.

Nor, according to Tacitus, was Trebellius alone in squandering his power as Britain's governor. Tacitus specifies that M. Vettius Bolanus, Trebellius' successor, failed to instill discipline in the camp and proved inert in response to Rome's enemies (16.5).²⁶ Hence, Tacitus informs us, Vettius possessed no authority in the province.²⁷

3. The Effectiveness of “Bad” Emperors

Roman governors, then, can serve as effective agents of both positive and negative change. But what about emperors in the *Agricola*? Let us start with those whom Tacitus condemned. We need not expend much effort demonstrating that Tacitus deemed Domitian's character flaws the prime cause of Rome's then-present woes. The *Agricola* positively brims with disdain for the late emperor. It also portrays Domitian's profound and deleterious effects on his subjects.

His decade and a half reign sapped the life out of the Romans (3.2):

Quid, si per quindecim annos, grande mortalis aevi spatium, multi fortuitis casibus, promptissimus quisque saevitia principis interciderunt? Pauci et, ut ita dixerim, non modo

²⁶ On Vettius' governorship, which lasted from 69 AD to 71, see Birley (2005) 57-62.

²⁷ Another potentially interesting case of commanders influencing their subordinates in the *Agricola* pertains to Suetonius Paulinus, the governor under whom Agricola served and whose tenure Tacitus portrays as more mixed (5, 14-16; cf. *Ann.* 14.29-39). But, perhaps because he was torn about Paulinus' effectiveness, Tacitus does not stress his influence on the army and the Britons, other than implicitly demonstrating that Paulinus at least allowed his underling Agricola to gain the requisite experience to serve him well in future positions (5).

aliorum sed etiam nostri superstites sumus, exemptis e media vita tot annis, quibus iuvenes ad senectutem, senes prope ad ipsos exactae aetatis terminos per silentium venimus.

What does it matter if through 15 years—a great expanse in the life of a human being—many died because of chance accidents, each most resolute man on account of the emperor’s cruelty, and we few people, if I may say so, are survivors not only of the others but even of ourselves, since so many years from the middle of our lives have been taken away, in which we as young men came to old age, and as old men came nearly to the very end of life in silence?

In the aftermath of Domitian’s assassination, this state of affairs resulted in a demoralized populace utterly hostile to the display of *virtus*—and even suspicious of its recording in works of biography and history (1.4). Domitian’s rule inaugurated the ultimate in slavery (2.3), Tacitus writes, shattering the voice of the Roman people and the *libertas* of the Senate (2.2). As we shall discuss below, according to Tacitus the ill effects linger, despite Domitian’s murder. The emperor’s influence, in fact, is depicted as much the same as that of Rome’s governors in Britain: direct and profound.

Nor is Domitian the only bad emperor whom Tacitus suggests had an intense impact on Roman comportment. In his brief discussion of his father-in-law’s early life, Tacitus remarks that Agricola cleverly altered his behavior to accommodate the proclivities of the emperor Nero.²⁸ Thus, though desirous of military glory (5.4), Agricola chose to accomplish little when serving under Nero, at a time in which *intertia pro sapientia fuit* (“passivity was in conformity with wisdom,” 6.3). His father’s erstwhile refusal to comply with the evils of Caligula (4.1)—which led to his murder—presumably taught Agricola to conduct himself in a way that ensured his survival under malignant emperors. Thus, according to Tacitus, Nero proved sufficiently destructive to alter the behavior of Agricola, the author’s beacon of selfless rectitude. Even Tacitus’ father-in-law changed his conduct—if not his character—to conform to the vicissitudes of a terrible ruler. In the *Agricola*, loathsome emperors are, if anything, all-too effective, and their ability to craft a Rome in their awful image comes across as the Empire’s chief demerit.

4. It’s not your Fault: Tacitus on Nerva and Trajan

The *Agricola* underscores the impact of Roman governors—both for good and for ill—on their underlings, and stresses the ways in which terrible emperors influence the moral climate of their times. What, then, about beneficent emperors? Does Tacitus portray them as equally effective in this regard?

²⁸ Tacitus stresses this sort of behavior on Agricola’s part when Agricola served under Vettius Bolanus in Britain (8.1). But Tacitus also claims (6.2) that the bad behavior of Salvius Titianus did not influence Agricola’s quaestorship in Asia. In this instance, at least, Tacitus appears to have complicated the topos—implied throughout much of the *Agricola* and stated explicitly in Livy (5.28.4)—that underlings take on the character of their leaders. It is a mark of Agricola’s virtue and wiliness that he does not fully allow his superiors to alter his character, at least in a straightforward and malign manner.

An examination of the *Agricola*'s preface provides an answer to these questions. And this examination leads us to a useful—and possibly unanticipated—conclusion. After lauding Nerva and Trajan, Tacitus, detailing the malaise that continues to plague Rome in the aftermath of Domitian's assassination, writes (3.1):

...natura tamen infirmitatis humanae tardiora sunt remedia quam mala; et ut corpora nostra lente augescunt, cito extinguuntur, sic ingenia studiaque oppresseris facilius quam revocaveris; subit quippe etiam ipsius inertiae dulcedo, et invisae primo desidia postremo amatur.

...nevertheless remedies are slower than maladies, thanks to the nature of human weakness; and as our bodies begin to grow slowly and are quickly extinguished, so you might more easily overwhelm people's intellects and enthusiasms than you might recover them; indeed, even the pleasure of laziness itself comes over us, and the idleness that was at first detested finally is loved.

Scholars have long recognized that this passage contains a medical analogy: Tacitus likens the Roman populace's sluggish moral recovery to the body's slow recuperation from disease.²⁹ Unlike the governor *Agricola*, Nerva and Trajan appear incapable of quickly influencing the people. Here the *Agricola* seems to complicate the topos also found in Livy (5.28.4): subject populations may not always emulate the character of their rulers.³⁰ Although Tacitus lays out the uncertain prospect that circumstances ultimately could improve during the reign of Trajan (cf. 44.5), he stresses that the state recovers slowly from a catastrophically bad emperorship. When it comes to emperors—and not governors—the “remedies are slower than the maladies.”

For how long have these remedies proved ineffective? For how long has the favorable presence of Nerva and Trajan failed to end Rome's moral decay? Unfortunately, insufficient testimony regarding the *Agricola*'s date of composition renders our conclusions on this score uncertain.³¹ But the available evidence allows us to suggest the parameters for a timeline. At 3.1, Tacitus refers to Trajan as *Nerva Traianus*. This specifies that Tacitus wrote this passage at some point after Nerva's adoption of Trajan (likely in late October, 97 AD), but probably prior

²⁹ See Leeman (1973) 203-4. Cf. Büchner (1956) 331; Martin (1967) 114; Shotter (1978) 235; Soverini (1996) 26-7; Marchetta (2004) 10-12; Sailor (2004) 154; Whitmarsh (2006) 311; Woodman (2012) 271-72 and (2014) 87. Woodman ([2012] 271-72) supposes that this passage refers strictly to Rome's literary life, and does not relate to the preface's earlier—and later—comments on the Empire's malaise. Others recognize, however, a broader meaning for the metaphor than Woodman allows: e.g., Marchetta (2004) 10-12; Sailor (2004) 154. In any case, the passage—and the preface as a whole—connects Rome's lack of a literary revival to the state's moral degeneration. As Liebeschuetz (1966: 133) justly suggests in regard to this passage: “Tacitus is writing about the psychological difficulty of starting on an historical work after living through many years of tyranny. But surely the demoralizing effect of tyranny is not thought to apply only to potential historians. The faculties numbed by submission to tyranny, such as independent judgement and freedom of speech, are basic moral qualities, and the fact that a man's submission may have enabled him to perform public service does not make his moral decline less—and this applies to readers as well as writers, indeed to society as a whole.”

³⁰ Unless, of course, one reads Tacitus as delivering ironic praise for Nerva and Trajan: in that case, the topos may remain unchanged.

³¹ On the dating of the *Agricola*, see, e.g., Syme (1970) 2; Benario (1975) 22; Schwarte (1979) 139; Vielberg (1987) 26, 13; Sage (1990) 854-55; Woodman (2012) 259 and (2014) 85.

to Nerva's death on January 27, 98.³² At 44.5, however, Tacitus mentions the *princeps Traianus*, and this suggests that he concluded the work after Nerva passed away.

In his recently published commentary, A. J. Woodman mentions “the few months that have passed since Domitian's death” and Tacitus' composition of the *Agricola*.³³ More time had elapsed than this allows. Since Domitian was assassinated on September 18, 96 AD,³⁴ at the very least a bit more than a year had transpired before Tacitus wrote the *Agricola*'s preface. According to Tacitus, after a full year the emperor and his successor still proved incapable of ameliorating Rome's moral woes.

The same cannot be said of a good governor: as we noted above, Tacitus specified that *Agricola* greatly improved his province's condition “immediately, within a year” (20.1). Not so Nerva and Trajan: though, in the *Agricola*, Roman governors worked quickly, “good” emperors lack the power to turn things around with such speed. Hence the *Agricola* offers only vague prospects for improvement under Trajan—prospects that, it appears, never became manifest.³⁵ In short, whereas good and bad governors can be effective, for Tacitus, only bad emperors can be effective. So readers of the *Agricola* could conclude that positive change cannot arise from an emperor (or, at the very best, it arises slowly and unsurely): either he is “bad” (and, unfortunately, effective), or he is “good” but unable efficiently to advance beneficial alterations in society. According to at least some of his audience, this is a sign that Tacitus perceived that monarchy was an inefficient form of government for the Romans. Terrible emperors—like all Roman governors—possess a capacity that better emperors lack. This clues the reader into the notion that Tacitus—his (obligatory) flattery of Nerva and Trajan notwithstanding—can be read as subtly expressing doubts about autocratic government at the level of the Empire from the start of his literary career.³⁶ A good Roman governor can quickly improve life in Britain; a good Roman emperor possesses little power over his subordinates.

Tacitus never provides an explicit rationale for his disparate estimation of good governors and good emperors. Did Tacitus perceive that emperors were less capable of promoting moral improvement in their subordinates due to differences between the subject populations (Romans vs. Britons)? As a politician who had risen to the consulship, Tacitus would naturally hope that emperors would allow for more senatorial *libertas*. The author may not show similar regard for the Britons, however, whose leaders (especially Calgacus) come across as Republican dead-enders (i.e., incapable of living in the imperial present). In any case, even at this early stage in his literary career, Tacitus suggests that emperors are less efficient at moral

³² On these matters, see Syme (1970) 3; Grainger (2003) 103-5, 108, 145 n. 11 and n. 20; Woodman (2012) 259, 287 and (2014) 8, 83.

³³ Woodman (2014) 87. The emphasis is mine.

³⁴ Suet. *Dom.* 17.

³⁵ According to many scholars, Tacitus ultimately became disillusioned with Trajan as an emperor: e.g., Von Fritz (1957) 92; Martin (1967) 114 and (1969) 126-7; Bardon (1968) 388-9; Tanner (1969) 97-8. Cf. Syme (1958) 219 and (1970) 135; Leeman (1973) 206. Others suggest that Tacitus was more critical from the start: e.g., Schwarte (1979) 173-5; Soverini (1996) 25-7, 37; O'Gorman (2000) 179, 182-3; Whitmarsh (2006) 311-2. As this article argues, we need not presume eventual disillusionment on Tacitus' part.

³⁶ In further support of this thesis is the idea offered by Schwarte ([1979] 163-65) and Sailor ([2008] 91-2), that Tacitus portrays *Agricola*'s governorship in a manner that harkens back to the halcyon days of the Republic.

amelioration than good governors, yet also susceptible to influencing their subordinates negatively more efficiently than positively.

5. Accentuating the Negative

We can adduce other reasons to suppose Tacitean skepticism about the Empire in the *Agricola*. As some have noted, Tacitus focuses much attention on the topic of slavery in the work (e.g., 15.1, 21.2, 30.1, 31.2, 32.1),³⁷ and it is clear that he did not confine this discussion to the Britons. Rather, Tacitus reflected on the possibility that Romans under the Empire found themselves enslaved. Woodman disagrees with this contention, suggesting that the Romans did not share our moral qualms with the enslaving of others and that attempts to demonstrate Tacitus' sympathy for the Britons' predicament are anachronistic and misguided.³⁸ But such a view flattens out the *Agricola*, denying it the tensions and internal inconsistency that help make the work so compelling. Just as W. Liebeschuetz argued that the *Agricola* "reveals two contradictory attitudes to the empire,"³⁹ we can say that the monograph presents two clashing perspectives on imperialism. Thus the work both lauds the governorship of Tacitus' father-in-law and expresses doubts about the value of the imperial project as a whole. For this reason, for example, Tacitus likens civilization itself to enslavement (21.2). This conclusion seems congruent with Bartsch's notion of Tacitean doublespeak: Tacitus allows the reader to see the text simply as praise for *Agricola*, but simultaneously permits a darker, even despairing, interpretation.⁴⁰ More generally, the *Agricola* presents a portrait of the age's spiritual decay that is so profound it is difficult to conclude that Tacitus put much stock in the prospects of a full moral recovery.

It is also important to note that the *Agricola* is to some degree a didactic work: it demonstrates how a statesman ought to act—and ought not act—in the principate.⁴¹ Tacitus' father-in-law, after all, proved that great men can live under bad emperors (42.4). This lesson only resonates with readers if we presume that Tacitus foresees other odious emperors in Rome's future. If Domitian, Caligula (4.1) and Nero (6.3) were aberrations, there would be little need to cast *Agricola*'s career as an example of the proper conduct of a Roman politician and general under autocracy.

In a recent discussion on the topic, Woodman criticizes scholars for allowing the pessimism of Tacitus' later works to color their views on the *Agricola*. He writes: "It is too easy to read back into the *Agricola* the authorial attitudes which are commonly associated with the *Histories* and, especially, the *Annals* (being written about fifteen years later, *grande mortalis aevi spatium*)."⁴² This may be a problem. But we should not prove blind to the reverse: there is no

³⁷ E.g., Jens (1956) esp. 338; Petersmann (1991) 1795; Whitmarsh (2006) 306, 315; Lavan (2011).

³⁸ Woodman (2014) 20-24.

³⁹ Liebeschuetz (1966) 134.

⁴⁰ See Bartsch (1994) esp. 98-125, 145-7.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Schwarte (1979) 168; McGing (1982) 22-3. Cf. Whitmarsh (2006) 324-5.

⁴² Woodman (2014) 84. For essentially the same sentiment, see Woodman (2012) 260 n. 9.

reason to presume an intellectual and moral journey on Tacitus' part—one that relies on a romantic conception of an artist, from the producer of juvenilia to a thinker more somber and mature.⁴³ By the time he had crafted the *Agricola*, Tacitus had already reached the pinnacle of his political career and was a famous orator to boot. We ought not assume a change of heart on Tacitus' part, which led a naïve historian to contemplate the true nature of the Empire. This is especially the case because Tacitus' earliest work gives us reason to suspect a sense of unease about Roman authoritarianism from the start.

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⁴³ Yet some scholars deem the *Agricola* an exercise in juvenilia: e.g., Sage (1991) 3393; Hanson (1991) 1742; Paratore (2012 [1962]). Specific features of the *Agricola* also likely compelled Tacitus to seem less pessimistic in the work. The *Agricola* is in part a *laudatio funebris*, for instance. And the work seems at least partly indebted to defending the political careers of the author and his father-in-law.

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