

TACITUS' VERDICT ON THE PHILOSOPHERS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Department of Classics

by

Robert Oswyn Bartolo

Winnipeg, October 1971



#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. E. G. Berry, Head of the Department of Classics and to Dr. B. L. Hijmans (formerly of this University), who suggested this topic, for their patience, guidance, encouragement and their many helpful suggestions.

## ABSTRACT

The object of this work is to assess Tacitus' verdict on the philosophers, particularly the leading philosophers who exerted some influence and who had a following in Rome and possibly in the wider Empire.

Since the philosophers of prime interest to Tacitus are the Stoics, Cynics and Epicureans, we examined briefly their philosophies before dealing with the philosophers mentioned by Tacitus. Foremost among those referred to are Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Thrasea Paetus, Helvidius Priscus and Barea Soranus.

We discovered not Tacitus' verdict on the philosophers as a whole but his verdict on individual philosophers and classes of philosophers. His hatred of tyranny led him to condemn every delator while his concern for the stability of Rome and the Roman Empire directed his hatred against those who opposed for the sake of opposing and his praise for those who co-operated with the Emperor in the service of Rome.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction . . . . .	1
I.    Cynicism and Stoicism... . . . .	3
II.   Epicureanism . . . . .	13
III.  Tacitus: Stoic or Epicurean? . . . . .	19
IV.   The Professional and Non-professional Philosophers . .	30
(a) General Remarks . . . . .	30
(b) Musonius, Thrasea and Other Stoics. . . . .	37
V.    Seneca the Philosopher . . . . .	62
VI.   Seneca the Man . . . . .	69
Conclusion . . . . .	84
Appendix . . . . .	87
Bibliography . . . . .	88

## Introduction

The period on which Tacitus comments in the Agricola and in the extant volumes of the Annals and the Histories, covers the death of the Republic, the birth of the Empire and the appearance of a succession of Caesars who ruled Rome. From a historical point of view this period is most interesting, for it is at this time that the people of Rome experienced the expansion of the Empire and the curtailment of their own freedom under the Julio-Claudian emperors. There is an abundance of philosophers and preachers, not only Stoic and Cynic preachers, but also the missionaries and exponents of the Eastern religions such as Mithraism, Judaism, the religion of Isis and of course Christianity. The Christians were certainly increasing in number and arousing suspicion by the time Nero came to power, for, whether rightly or wrongly, he was able to accuse them of being responsible for the great fire of 64 A.D.

The social and moral conditions that existed in Rome especially in the time of Claudius and Nero -- the court scandals and the questionable practices of the courtiers, the reported widespread moral turpitude, the existence of extremely wealthy patrons and begging clients -- provided material for the pens of several historians and satirists. It is difficult to determine which of the three chief writers who describe these times, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio, is the most accurate and gives the picture that most closely approximates the real state of affairs: "The period as a whole is judged more mildly in Suetonius and Dio than in Tacitus; and these are the writers who have been justly accused of a tendency to

sensational exaggeration."<sup>1</sup> The most usual conclusion is that while Tacitus exaggerates least of the three, his own portrayal must be regarded with caution also; for while not given to exaggeration for the sake of sensation, he has strong feelings and, for what they are worth, his own set of moral principles.

In such a period, which was not necessarily more corrupt than any other period of history, but which was unfortunate enough to have a succession of tyrants, the philosophers and religious leaders would inevitably be regarded (even if it is with the hindsight of an historian) as very important individuals, who could offer some sort of leadership to an otherwise leaderless nation.

It is in this connection that we shall try to examine the works of Tacitus; we shall attempt to assess his verdict on the philosophers, particularly the leading philosophers who exerted some influence and who had a following in Rome and possibly in the wider Empire. The philosophers of prime interest to Tacitus are the Stoics, Cynics and Epicureans, whose philosophies we shall examine briefly before dealing with the philosophers and the treatment they receive at the hands of Tacitus.

In undertaking to assess Tacitus' verdict on the philosophers, we shall try to resist the temptation to indulge in historical comment and literary criticism except where, in keeping with our subject, it becomes necessary to comment on Tacitus the historian and Tacitus the artist.

---

<sup>1</sup>B. Walker, The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History, p. 6.

## I. Cynicism and Stoicism

Cynicism, a minor Socratic school which had its beginning in Athens, was founded by Antisthenes (c.445-c.365), a devoted adherent of Socrates. What Antisthenes admired most in Socrates was his "independence of character, which led him to act in accordance with his convictions no matter what the cost."<sup>1</sup> However, Antisthenes failed to see that Socrates' independence was a means to an end. To Antisthenes, "virtue . . . was simply independence of all earthly possessions and pleasures; in fact it was a negative concept--remuneration, self-sufficiency. Thus the negative side of Socrates' life was changed by Antisthenes into a positive good or end."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, naturally, Cynicism never really flourished in Greece, even though Diogenes of Sinope (d.c. 324 B.C.) because of his eccentricities and animal-like behaviour, did become a major tourist attraction in Athens. It was the moral corruption of the Roman Empire which prompted a revival of Cynicism. Epicureanism and Stoicism, influential as they were, appealed mainly to the members of the aristocracy; the masses were generally neglected and left to their own devices. "To meet the spiritual and moral needs of the masses there grew up a different type of 'apostle,' that of the Cynic preacher or missionary. These men led the life of the itinerant preachers, poor and self-denying, aiming at the "conversion" of

---

<sup>1</sup>F. Copleston, A History of Philosophy Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

the masses who came to hear them."<sup>3</sup>

The Cynic method of imparting moral instruction, -- the diatribe (a discourse "dealing with subjects such as discipline, endurance, marriage, obedience to parents, and so forth"<sup>4</sup>)-- was followed by Musonius Rufus, who, perhaps unseasonably as Tacitus reports,<sup>5</sup> but nevertheless at the risk of his own life, began to admonish the troops of Vespasian and Vitellius on the blessings of peace and the perils of war. His teachings which will be discussed in a later chapter, and those of his famous pupil, Epictetus, who showed strong Cynic sympathies, abound in examples of the "diatribe".

The diatribe, or perhaps the style of the diatribe, was employed by Seneca, a Stoic, in several of his discourses. This affinity with Cynicism on Seneca's part is no coincidence, for, he is believed to have been a close friend of Demetrius the Cynic, on whom he is regarded by Dudley as the best authority.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the Cynics were severely and justly criticized for their crudeness and lack of good taste and proper respect for authority. However, not all of the later Cynics were of this type; men like Demetrius and Dio Chrysostom were sincere and respectable philosophers who deserved the praise and honour they received.

---

<sup>3</sup>Copleston, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, Part II, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup>E. V. Arnold, Roman Stoicism, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup>Tacitus, Histories, p. 3, 81.

<sup>6</sup>D. R. Dudley, A History of Cynicism, p. 141.



The Cynics were very necessary to the Roman Empire, since they supplied that

. . . sermonizing, preaching of morals and 'soul saving' which the official clergy, concerned only with magic and ritual, care nothing about . . . . Furthermore their teaching that poverty and wealth, slavery or freedom make no difference to real well-being (ἀδιαφοροία) . . . was quite acceptable to the wealthy ruling classes . . . . Moreover it fostered among the down-trodden poor and the exploited slaves the shiftless resignation with their fate and that hopeless absence of social and economic aspirations which Ferdinand Lasalle has so fiercely damned as one of the worst obstacles barring the way to a better social order. The beautiful marble statues of Antisthenes and Crates which have come down to us did not stand originally in a slaves' ergastulum or a worker's house, where nowadays we might find a cheap print of a portrait of Karl Marx, but in the cool parks of a wealthy Roman's Tusculum.<sup>7</sup>

### Stoicism

Even though Stoicism originated in Greece and flourished there for a long time, yet it was in Rome that the movement survived after the fall of Greece and probably had its greatest influence. Founded by Zeno of Citium (c.350-260 B.C.) the movement spread throughout the East and finally entered the West when Rome conquered these parts.

The appeal of Stoicism lay not so much in its apperceptive theory of knowledge as in its ethics which was perhaps the greatest contribution made by the movement. Like Epicureanism, the Stoic system claimed that it had the answer for man in his search for peace of mind. Happiness for the Stoic was a state of 'apathy' -- a kind of peace of mind which means

---

<sup>7</sup>Robert Eisler, s.v. "Cynicism" in The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences.

not listlessness but imperviousness to perturbations."<sup>8</sup> This view of the summum bonum is understandable since the Stoic doctrine is deterministic.

In order to attain this ἀπὸ θεῶν man is required to live according to nature and do his duty--a duty that is dictated and determined by the Λόγος or Divine Will. This deterministic view which is well expressed in the words of Seneca, "Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt,"<sup>9a</sup> was in fact "greatly modified in practice, since the doctrine that the wise man is he who consciously follows the path of Destiny (a doctrine brought out in the dictum of Seneca just quoted), when coupled with their [the Stoics'] exhortatory ethic, implies liberty to a certain extent . . . -- a man is free to change his inner attitude and to adopt one of submission and resignation rather than rebellion."<sup>9</sup>

The performance of one's duty was not just an intellectual ideal; it meant that every Stoic should take part in the political and social life of the State. As against the Epicurean standpoint of seeking one's own pleasure, the Stoics with their doctrine of duty claimed that man's peace of mind came through making others happy; thus the intention behind every action is more important than the action itself. This idea is brought out quite clearly in the following: "He who abstains from some disgraceful action yet all the while has desire for it, will some day do

---

<sup>8</sup>Moses Hadas in his introduction to Essential Works of Stoicism, p. ix.

<sup>9a</sup>Seneca, Ep. 107, 11

<sup>9</sup>Copleston, op. cit., Vol. 1, Part II, p. 140.

it, when he gets opportunity"<sup>10</sup> and "actio recta non erit, nisi fuerit recta voluntas",<sup>11</sup>

An important product of the Stoic ethic was the idea of a "cosmopolis" or universal city. E. V. Arnold, the English scholar of Stoicism, describes this Stoic concept in this way.

This title arose from the practice attributed to Socrates and Diogenes (as well as others), of replying to the current question, 'Of what city are you?' by the answer 'Of the universe.' We must therefore regard ourselves as members not of a clan or city, but of a world-wide society. In this society all distinctions of race, caste and class are to be subordinated to the sense of kinship and brotherhood. This principle is equally opposed to the nationalist prejudices which rank Hellene above barbarian, to philosophical theories (such as that of Aristotle) which distinguish intelligent peoples fitted by nature to rule and others only fitted to obey, and to ideal states (such as that of Plato) in which a ruling class is to be developed by artifice and schooling. Only the brute animals are excluded from this community for they are not possessed of reason; they have therefore no rights, but exist for the service of men. All human beings are capable of attaining virtue, and as such are natural-born citizens of the Cosmopolis. Loyalty to this state, however, in no wise hinders a due loyalty to existing states which may be regarded as partial realizations of it.<sup>12</sup>

This idea of the cosmopolis provided a rationalization and perhaps an ethical justification for the Roman Empire and offered the hope that someday the rulers would rise above their pettiness and selfishness to the ideal of the equality of all men. Also this ideal provided Roman jurists with a working tool whereby laws could be formulated for the protection of people of every nation and distinctions could be made between

---

<sup>10</sup>Stob.iii 6, 3 (Arnim 1573).

<sup>11</sup>Seneca Ep 95, 57, Quoted by Arnold op. cit., p. 286.

<sup>12</sup>Arnold, op. cit., p. 274.

the differing laws of the various peoples. As the Roman Empire expanded, the civil law (ius civile) was found to be inadequate to unify the diverse peoples of the colonies and to deal with the numerous aliens in their midst and solve the various international problems of trade. "The answer was found by the formulation of a law of nations (ius gentium), alongside the Stoic law of nature (ius naturale), the law common to all nations and the law common to all men."<sup>13</sup>

Basic to Stoic theology and the idea of the Cosmopolis is the Stoic view of the universe. While the Epicureans leaned on Democritus for their theory of atomism, the Stoics used the Heraclitean doctrine of the logos and fire as the basis for their cosmology.

In the eyes of the Stoics the world is a "dynamic continuum" in a constant state of flux. The basic element, the stuff of all things, is fire. God is the active fire, from whom the other elements that make the world come forth.<sup>14</sup> "Earth is the lowest of the elements and also the grossest; above it is placed water, then air, then fire; and these are in constant interchange, earth turning to water, this into air, and this into aether, and so again in return. By this interchange the unity of the universe is maintained."<sup>15</sup>

With the constant upward movement of earth to water, to air, to fire, and back again, there is always a cycle of rarefactions and

---

<sup>13</sup>Michael Curtis, The Great Political Theories, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup>Copleston, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>15</sup>Arnold, op. cit., p. 180.

condensations, the completion of which is marked by a conflagration-- "the period between one conflagration and the next being termed a great year."<sup>16</sup> In consequence of this theory, there is also a recurrence of events--the events of ~~one~~ cycle are duplicated in the next, and so the men of each new world resemble their predecessors and perform the identical actions from one cycle to the next.

This cosmological determinism explains to a great extent the Stoic concept of fate and their idea of man's free will "in the sense that man can order his judgment on events and his attitude towards events, seeing them and welcoming them as the expression of 'God's Will!'"<sup>17</sup>

Consistent with their theory of the dynamic continuum is the Stoic idea of combinations. "In ordinary experience we meet with ~~three~~ kinds of combinations: juxtaposition (παράθεσις), as in a mixture of various kinds of grain; mixture (μίξις), when solid bodies are interfused, as fire and heat, or in fusion (κρᾶσις) when fluids are interfused, as wine poured into the sea."<sup>18</sup> "The wine will gradually extend over and permeate the whole of the water until finally it is lost in the mixture in which each fluid interpenetrates the other."<sup>19</sup>

This concept of fusion and interpenetration, together with the idea of God being in all creation, led the Stoics to a very definite and

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 193

<sup>17</sup> Copleston, op. cit., Vol. I, Part II, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, op. cit., p. 169

<sup>19</sup> R. D. Hicks, Stoic and Epicurean, p. 29.

complete immanency, for since God, the active principle, the primeval and all pervading fire, is in everything, the universe itself is a perfect living creature--is God. Also every phenomenon of nature, whether it be lightning, the flight of birds or an abnormal birth, had some relation to the lives of men and could be regarded as omen of good or of evil. Thus many Stoics believed in and practised divination to some extent.

Although Stoicism succeeded and became widespread and popular among the Romans, yet because of the lack of a uniform school discipline and a dogmatic approach to philosophy, there existed a variety of interpretations of some of the Stoic doctrines. This variety, though it did not seem to trouble the Stoics themselves, did result in a lack of uniformity among the conduct of practising Stoics. The most different and various modes of behaviour might still be quite legitimately described as "Stoic". One case in point is the issue of suicide or "reasonable departure". This practice was largely recommended to the Stoics by the examples of Socrates and Cato. "The doctrine is intended in the first instance to justify death gloriously met in fighting for one's country or one's friends; next when intolerable pain or incurable disease plainly indicates the will of the deity; in the development of Roman history a third reason was found in the loss of political freedom."<sup>20</sup> Under the Principate, 'reasonable departure' degenerated to 'free departure', a way out rather than a glorious end to a glorious life.

---

<sup>20</sup>Arnold, op. cit., p. 309f.

Another area in which there is a strange and perhaps more obvious dichotomy is in the interpretation of the term 'duty'. To most Stoics duty meant involvement in politics so as to ensure good government; it also meant trying to make the best of a bad job in order to avoid the worst. Yet beside a man like Seneca who is something of an enigma in his support of Nero, we find the "Stoic Opposition" by an equally ardent and sincere Stoic Thrasea Paetus, who was convinced that it was his duty as a Stoic to condemn the Neronian oppression and to refuse to participate in the senatorial proceedings. Obviously, there was, within Stoicism, room for a variety of opinion and interpretation on any given topic and rather than regard this factor as a flaw, it may be wise to consider it in the light of certain religions (e.g. Christianity) where there is also room for a variety of conduct.

When one thinks of the doctrine of the brotherhood and equality of man, one is faced with the puzzling question of why slavery was not abolished or even denounced. It is true that in some cases the tenets of Stoicism led to the amelioration of the lot of slaves, but even when some of these slaves were liberated, they were accepted not as citizens but as freedmen with very limited rights.

According to one commentator, Stoicism "was a personal rather than a social philosophy. It took for granted the hierarchial order of society, and the performance by each individual of his allotted function. If there was commitment to anything it was to maintenance of conditions as they were."<sup>21</sup> Probably a great deal of the inconsistencies and anomalies in

---

<sup>21</sup>Curtis, op. cit., p. 98.

Stoicism can be explained in its doctrine of fatalism and its views of evil. "According to the Stoics no act is evil and reprehensible in itself; it is the intention, the moral condition of the agent from whom the act proceeds that makes the act evil: the act as a physical entity is indifferent."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Copleston, op. cit., Vol. I, Part I, p. 135, cf. notes 10 and 11 above.



## II. Epicureanism

Founded by Epicurus in the third century B.C., Epicureanism like its close rival Stoicism, had its origins in Greece and later enjoyed some success in Rome. Unlike those of Stoicism, the doctrines of Epicureanism were fairly well outlined in the works of the master and his followers; of most of their works there exist only fragments. The most important of the surviving Epicurean works the De Rerum Natura, by the Roman poet Lucretius, is one of our main sources for the teachings of Epicureanism.

Believing that in ethics lay the panacea for all of life's ills, Epicurus held that the value of all other studies was that they were instrumental to the study of ethics. Like the Stoics, the Epicureans sought to answer what they believed to be life's greatest question: "How can a man find peace of mind?" or "What is the summum bonum?" The answer was simple: "Pleasure is the end of life; pleasure is the only intrinsic good and pain the only intrinsic evil," and around this view was built the entire Epicurean doctrine.

It is in the quest for pleasure, his own pleasure, that a man is forced to cultivate virtue, which even though only a means to an end, is indispensable for a happy life. This view of life, which encourages a form of moral relativism, that is, it "maintains that our moral judgments are relative to certain factors such as cultural milieu or individual bias,"<sup>1</sup> has led to a great deal of misunderstanding and misrepresentation

---

<sup>1</sup>W. J. Jones, A History of Philosophy, p. 1019.

of the Epicurean ethic. While it is indeed an ethical theory based on the hedonistic calculus, true Epicureanism tends to foster as austere and rigid a life as the most puritanical doctrines.

In affirming that "pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily," Epicurus made it clear that he meant not the pleasures of the moment, but the pleasure which endures through a lifetime; that pleasure consisted not so much in positive satisfaction as in the absence of pain. "This pleasure is to be found pre-eminently in serenity of soul (ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραχία). With this serenity of soul Epicurus conjoined health of body, but the emphasis is rather on intellectual pleasure, for, while very severe bodily pains are of short duration, less severe pain may be overcome or rendered bearable by intellectual pleasures."<sup>2</sup> The chief good, then, is not the pleasure found in drunkenness or debauchery, but the pleasure that comes when the body is free from pain and the soul is free from confusion.

The wise man, in thinking of his pleasure, would consider the long-range effects of his actions, so that, while the supreme evil is pain, he would gladly undergo some necessary pain in order to enjoy real pleasure in the long run. For this reason men were exhorted to avoid the positive pleasures that would give a violent jolt and seek the static forms of enjoyment which lead to peace and a quiet state of contentment. Also it was advisable to control and suppress one's desires and seek only

---

<sup>2</sup>Copleston, op. cit., Vol. I, Part II, p. 151.

those things which were both natural and necessary.

The pleasure principle was again at work in the case of man's dealings with his neighbors, forcing a kind of social contract, as Lucretius expresses it:

Neighbors began to form mutual alliances, wishing neither to do or to suffer violence among themselves. They appealed on behalf of their children and women folk, pointing out with gestures and inarticulate cries that it is right for everyone to pity the weak. It was not possible to achieve perfect unity of purpose. Yet a substantial majority kept faith honestly. Otherwise the entire human race would have been wiped out there and then instead of being propagated, generation after generation, down to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

From this, it is easy to understand why justice and kindness are preferable to injustice and unkindness. By the same token, friendship is recommended as being preferable to enmity and where it is not possible to avoid enmity a man ought to keep, in his own interest, as far as possible away from his enemies. At this point it may be of interest to note that even though the Epicurean ethic is fundamentally egocentric in that it is based on the individual's own pleasure, in practice it was not as selfish as it might sound. The true Epicurean probably subscribed to the idea, "No man is an island, no man stands alone," and so even though his own interests were of the greatest importance he practised in some form the tenets of the "Golden Rule" -- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The entire doctrine of Epicureanism was geared to free men from fear, and even though the founder was not much interested in physics, he

---

<sup>3</sup>Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, 5. 1018-1027, translated by R. E. Latham.

found it convenient to his system to resurrect the atomistic view of physics as taught by Leucippus and Democritus in order to explain the structure of the universe and the nature of the gods. Man's greatest fears, according to Epicurus and later Lucretius, are the fear of the gods and the fear of death; these fears exist because of ignorance, -- hence the Epicurean physics.

With the proposition, 'Nothing is ever begotten of nothing by divine will,'<sup>4</sup> he set out to explain the existence of the world and the various physical phenomena as the result of the mechanical motion of atoms falling through space. The first appearance of different objects in creation, e.g., trees, goats or even flies, was not the result of some god saying, "Let there be . . . ," but rather the result of atoms swerving off their course and colliding with others. In this way he was able to take the gods out of the plan of creation and place them somewhere far in the heavens beyond, where, as perfect beings they contemplate their perfection and are a lofty example to man. Composed as they are of the finest atoms -- the gods are anthropomorphically conceived with ethereal or quasi-bodies -- the gods are in no position to direct the affairs of men nor can they be affected in any way by the prayers of men.

And just as nothing is created from nothing, so "does nothing return to nothing but everything is resolved into its constituent bodies"<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Lucretius, l. 150: "Nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam".

<sup>5</sup>Lucretius, l. 248-249: "Haud igitur redit ad nilum res ulla, sed omnes/Discidio redeunt in corpora materiai."

". . . for were the fact otherwise, everything would be produced from everything and there would be no need of any seed. And if that which disappeared (sic!) were so absolutely destroyed as to become non-existent, then everything would soon perish, as the things with which they would be dissolved would have no existence."<sup>6</sup> Even the human body and soul are resolved, at death, into their pre-existing atoms. Thus man need no longer fear a life after death or any punishment in Hell, for "all those torments that are said to take place in the depths of Hell are actually present here and now."<sup>7</sup> The wise man, therefore, does not fear death -- for death is mere extinction -- nor the gods -- for they are unconcerned with human affairs and exact no retribution."<sup>8</sup>

By divorcing the gods from the plan of creation and by relegating them to the "intermundia" where they can in no way affect the affairs of men, the Epicureans stood clearly in favour of the doctrine of Freewill as against that of determinism which was held by the Stoics. However, in taking this view, Epicurus and his followers had to adapt to their own beliefs, the atomic physics, which in its original form lent itself to a deterministic view of human behaviour. Human behaviour which is controlled or at least affected by the motion of atoms would of necessity be pre-determined if one were to follow the original atomic concept. Thus instead of the normal downward motion of atoms, there is occasionally a

---

<sup>6</sup>Diogenes Laërtius, quoted in Copleston, op. cit., p. 148.

<sup>7</sup>Lucretius III, 978-979.

<sup>8</sup>Copleston, op. cit., p. 150.

slight swerve from the vertical; this swerve is, according to Lucretius: "the source of that will power snatched from the fates, whereby we follow the path along which we are severally led by pleasure, swerving from our course at no set time or place but at the bidding of our own hearts."<sup>9</sup> This explanation, although inadequate and fraught with loopholes, was the best that he could offer. While the "swerve" does offer some explanation for complete indeterminism, it does not account sufficiently for the concept of freedom of choice.

It is not surprising that there were not very many Epicureans involved in politics and public life since Epicurus taught that "the wise man will not mix himself up in politics, as this disturbs tranquility of the soul. There are, however, two exceptions: the first, that of the man who needs to take part in politics in order to ensure his own personal security, the second, that of a man who has such an urge towards a political career that ἀταξία would be quite impossible for him were he to remain in retirement."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lucretius, 2, 257-261.

<sup>10</sup> Copleston, op. cit., p. 155.

### III. Tacitus: Stoic or Epicurean?

Throughout the major works of Tacitus there are references, some of them detailed, some merely passing, to philosophers and philosophy. Close study of these references will reveal that Tacitus was not only well acquainted with the current schools of Hellenistic philosophy and their leading exponents, but that he was very much interested in philosophy and probably had his own philosophical bias.

On reading the Annals one is forced to note the regular occurrences of the words fatum and fortuna and the mention of various omens, portents and prodigies. Tacitus' treatment of these concepts and the spirit in which he records the various omens are not always consistent. Sometimes he speaks with the conviction of a true believer in Providence and the prophetic value of certain omens as in: "Several prodigies occurred in that year. Birds of evil omen perched on the Capital; houses were thrown down by frequent shocks of earthquake, . . . ." <sup>1</sup> or in: "In the year of the consulship of Marcus Asinius and Manius Acilius it was seen to be portended by a succession of prodigies that there were to be political changes for the worse."<sup>2</sup> On other occasions he questions the idea of Providence; for example, after describing the good fortune of Manius Lepidus, "a wise and high-principled man" Tacitus adds, "This compels me to doubt

---

<sup>1</sup>Annals, 12. 43, 1 (Translations of Tacitus are from The Complete Works of Tacitus translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb.)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 12. 64, 1.

whether the liking of princes for some men and their antipathy to others depend, like other contingencies, on a fate and destiny to which we are born, or, to some degree, on our own plans;"<sup>3</sup> or again, commenting on the almost tragic meeting between Thrasyllus and Tiberius at which Thrasyllus foretold the doom that threatened his own life Tacitus says, "When I hear of these and like occurrences, I suspend my judgment on the question whether it is fate and unchangeable necessity or chance which governs the revolutions of human affairs."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, on a few occasions he seems to accuse the gods of not caring: "aequitate deum erga bona malaque documenta,"<sup>5</sup> or sneer at the idea of providence, fate and fortune: "prodigia quoque crebra et inrita intercessere."<sup>6</sup>

Even though Tacitus does record many portents, it is clear that while he does not completely disbelieve in omens, he does not place his trust in every interpretation of omens given by the official interpreters or by laymen. In reporting the significance of the various omens, Tacitus uses the hindsight of an historian to accept or reject interpretations according to the turn of events. The common soldiers regarded the eclipse of the moon as an omen of their condition merely out of ignorance of the

---

<sup>3</sup>Annals, 4. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 6. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 16. 33, 1 "so impartially indifferent is heaven to examples of virtue and vice".

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 14. 12, 3 "There occurred too a thick succession of portents, which meant nothing." In the same passage Tacitus adds, "sine cura deum" --without divine forethought.



cause of the phenomenon,<sup>7</sup> but it was quite in order for Tacitus to regard other phenomena such as lightning, earthquake, the flight of birds and unnatural births as portents.<sup>8</sup> Again, having described three portents as "unlucky omen,"<sup>9</sup> he reports Paetus as having despised the omens,<sup>10</sup> -- omens which indeed seemed trivial; but in an earlier book he describes a series of blood-chilling events and adds, "All this happened without any providential design."<sup>11</sup> On these inconsistencies Furneaux remarks, "Though Tacitus is not a disbeliever in omens generally his language elsewhere would go far to justify those who thus disregard them."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Annals, 1. 28, 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 12. 32, 1: "Several prodigies occurred in that year. Birds of evil omen perched on the Capitol; houses were thrown down by frequent shocks of earthquake, . . . ." 64. 1: "In the year of the consulship of Marcus Asinius and Manius Acilius it was seen to be portended by a succession of prodigies that there were to be political changes for the worse. The soldiers' standards and tents were set in a blaze by lightning. A swarm of bees settled on the summit of the Capitol; births of monsters, half man, half beast, and of a pig with a hawk's talons, were reported."

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 15. 7: "A horse which carried the consul's emblems took fright without any apparent cause and fled to the rear. A victim . . . standing by some winter-tents . . . broke its way through them . . . and got clear out of the entrenchments. Then again the soldiers' javelins gleamed with light, a prodigy the more significant because the Parthian foe fights with missiles."

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 15. 8.

<sup>11</sup>Annals, 14. 12. "A woman gave birth to a snake, and another was killed by a thunderbolt in her husband's embrace. Then the sun was suddenly darkened and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning. All this happened without any providential design; so much so, that for many subsequent years Nero prolonged his reign and his crimes."

<sup>12</sup>Furneaux, Note on Annals, 15.8.

As far as his attitude toward specific philosophic schools is concerned, it is clear from his works that Tacitus' sympathies lay with the Stoic tenets. His praise for Agricola's courage in adversity,<sup>13</sup> for the Ligurian woman's constancy in the face of death<sup>14</sup> and for Epicharis' courage even under severe torture<sup>15</sup> which contrasted with the cowardice of the Roman knights and senators betrays strong Stoic tendencies.

In the Agricola, we find that Tacitus has high words of praise for his father-in-law Agricola who, under Domitian, pursued a policy of non-resistance to the Emperor and strong criticism for the so-called "Stoic opposition". It would appear that in praising the "moderation and prudence of Agricola, who neither by a perverse obstinacy nor an idle parade of freedom challenged fame or provoked his fate,"<sup>16</sup> Tacitus was doing more than eulogizing his father-in-law or even supporting his policy -- a policy which Tacitus himself pursued under Domitian. Indeed when noting the success and advancement he enjoyed during Domitian's reign, one finds it not difficult to agree with the view that Tacitus felt guilt at going along with the Domitianic regime and was at pains to justify his acquiescence.<sup>17</sup> Thus Tacitus was probably giving his own interpretation of the

---

<sup>13</sup>Agricola, 27.

<sup>14</sup>Histories, 2. 13.

<sup>15</sup>Annals, 15. 57.

<sup>16</sup>Agricola, 42. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Syme, Tacitus, p. 540. "The biography of Agricola offers a temperate defence of political opportunism . . . . Courage and integrity perished but time servers came through. Guilt and compunction . . . dwelt with Tacitus ever after . . . ."

Stoic concept of duty, duty that manifests itself in involvement in political affairs. The closing lines of Chapter 42 of the Agricola lend further confirming evidence to this view:

Let it be known to those whose habit it is to admire the disregard of authority, that there may be great men even under bad emperors, and that obedience and submission when joined to activity and vigour, may attain a glory which most men reach only by a perilous career, utterly useless to the state, and closed by an ostentatious death.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Tacitus, in describing the fate of the Stoics Thrasea, Soranus and their friends, let slip the statement ". . . so indifferent is heaven to examples of virtue or vice."<sup>19</sup> Commenting on this statement, Furneaux remarked, "This sentiment is the most Epicurean that has been preserved to us of Tacitus, and would seem to show that such scepticism grew upon him towards the close of his work."<sup>20</sup> But as Miss Walker points out, while there is certainly a leaning towards scepticism, "there is more bitterness in Tacitus' attitude than would be consistent with the Epicurean spirit; he finds in the gods' indifference a cause for reproach."<sup>21</sup> The suggestion that Tacitus is even partly Epicurean is roundly refuted by P. Grénade in his article, "Le Pseudo-Epicurisme de Tacite" where he shows also that Tacitus was not a sceptic and was not at all inclined towards this doctrine.

La meilleur preuve que Tacite n'incline pas vers le scepticisme, c'est qu'il garde sa foi en la protection de Dieux sur Rome et qu'il

---

<sup>18</sup> Agricola, 42. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Annals, 16. 33, 1, quoted earlier; see note 5 above.

<sup>20</sup> Furneaux, Note on Annals 16. 33, 1, Vol. II, p. 469.

<sup>21</sup> B. Walker, op. cit., p. 252 .

partage avec ses contemporains la croyance en la prédestination de l'Urbs à la domination du monde. Sur ce point, il rencontre la pensée stoïcienne qui apporte à l'imperialisme romain sa justification morale.<sup>22</sup>

From the evidence available in his extant works, it is possible to draw a few conclusions about Tacitus' philosophy and his religious outlook. He was clearly not attracted to the "atheism" of Epicureanism; even though he expressed a few doubts, it is most unlikely that he was a Sceptic. Perhaps it would be safer to say that like many educated Romans he was a "mild" Stoic with eclectic tendencies. These tendencies might have been the result of his oratorical training which was probably similar to that described in the Dialogue where he lists his recommended course of studies for the young orator and adds, "It is not a philosopher after the Stoic school whom we are forming, but one who ought to imbibe some studies and have a taste for all."<sup>23</sup> Or they might have been due to his being not completely convinced that any one doctrine had the answer to life's problems, a feeling he expressed in his philosophical digression when, referring to the episode of Thrasyllus' accuracy as an astrologer<sup>24</sup> he said,

When I hear of these and like occurrences, I suspend my judgment on the question whether it is fate and unchangeable necessity or chance which governs the revolutions of human affairs. Indeed, among the wisest of the ancients and among their disciples you will find conflicting theories, many<sup>25</sup> holding the conviction that heaven does not concern itself with the beginning or the end of our life, or in short, with mankind at all; and that therefore sorrows are continually the

---

<sup>22</sup>P. Grénade, "Le Pseudo-Epicurisme de Tacite", in Revue des Etudes Anciennes, Vol. LV (1953), pp. 36-57.

<sup>23</sup>Dialogue, 31, 31.

<sup>24</sup>Annals, 6. 21, Thrasyllus is reported in this chapter to have read in the stars Tiberius' threat on his life.

<sup>25</sup>I.E., the Epicureans.

lot of the good, happiness of the wicked; while others,<sup>26</sup> on the contrary, believe that, though there is a harmony between fate and events yet it is not dependent on wandering stars, but on primary elements, and on a combination of natural causes. Still, they leave us the capacity of choosing our life, maintaining that, the choice once made, there is a fixed sequence of events.<sup>27</sup> Good and evil, again, are not what vulgar opinion accounts them; many who seem to be struggling with adversity are happy; many, amid great affluence, are utterly miserable, if only the first bear their hard lot with patience, and the latter make a foolish use of their prosperity.

Most men, however, cannot part with the belief that each person's future is fixed from his very birth, but that some things happen differently from what has been foretold through the impostures of those who describe what they do not know, and that this destroys the credit of science, clear testimonies to which have been given both by past ages and by our own.<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on this passage Miss Walker notes that "the ambiguity of his attitude towards Stoicism, whose strength and deficiencies he felt at once so keenly, remained unsettled."<sup>29</sup> However, as Syme remarks, "Certitude is not given to mortals, and Tacitus is redeemed by his respect for the eternal ambiguities."<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding his uncertainty, Tacitus does leave us with the impression that he believed in some form of predestination and that our destinies "could be foretold from our horoscope were we sure of our interpreter."<sup>31</sup> At the same time his belief in

---

<sup>26</sup>The Stoics.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Seneca's "Ducunt nolentem fata, nolentem trahunt," See Chapter 7, note 9a.

<sup>28</sup>Annals, 6. 22.

<sup>29</sup>B. Walker, op. cit., p. 250.

<sup>30</sup>R. Syme, Tacitus, p. 527.

<sup>31</sup>Furneaux, Introduction to Annals, Vol. I, p. 30.

prodigies and omens as a means whereby the future was revealed is tempered by his view that "misrepresentations were rife, and that many prognostications were only recognized as such after the event."<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, this tendency towards eclecticism might have been caused in part by his inability to reconcile the conflicting ideas of fate and fortune and the difficulty of explaining in terms of fatalism, the role of a man's personal qualities and character, as in the cases of Agricola and Manius Lepidus, in the shaping of his destiny. Commenting on the favour that Lepidus enjoyed under Tiberius, Tacitus praised the tact and strategy of the man and added,

This compels me to doubt whether the liking of princes for some men and their antipathy to others depend, like other contingencies, on a fate and destiny to which we are born, or, to some degree, on our own plans; so that it is possible to pursue a course between a defiant independence and a debasing servility, free from ambition and its perils.<sup>33</sup>

Could this in fact be Tacitus' explanation of his own political philosophy? His interpretation of the concept of Providentia?

When one considers his use of certain key words, it becomes clear that Tacitus lacked the conviction of a philosopher. Fatum, for example, is sometimes used to express some inexplicable cause as the "destiny of power"<sup>34</sup> in his comments on the similar course of the careers of Crispus

---

<sup>32</sup>Furieux, loc. cit., Cf. also note 3 above "quae adeo sine cura deum eveniebant." Ann. 14. 12, 4.

<sup>33</sup>Annals, 4. 20.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 3. 30, 7.

and Maecenas or "some fatality"<sup>35</sup> when describing Nero's rejection of Octavia -- virtuous and high-born -- for Acte a freedwoman. On other occasions fatum is used to suggest natural death as against death by someone's treachery<sup>36</sup> or by one's own hand as in the case of the ill-fated king Archelaus who "ended his life, by his own act or by a natural death."<sup>37</sup>

Again, fatum is personified as in "Destiny was thus simultaneously preparing the occasions of civil and foreign war"<sup>38</sup> and in "Several tribes were subdued and kings made prisoners and destiny learnt to know its favorite,"<sup>39</sup> and again in "May the tribes retain if not love for us, at least hatred for each other; for while the destinies of empire hurry us on, fortune can give no greater boon than discord among our foes."<sup>40</sup>

Indeed it would be unfair and incorrect to label Tacitus a philosopher, since he lacked the conviction and consistency of a philosopher. More than anything else, Tacitus was a Roman. His hostilities were directed against those religions that were not in keeping with Roman sentiment. Similarly, in his 'Stoicism', he was attracted to Stoics like Agricola who submitted to authority and placed the interests of Rome

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13. 12, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Annals, 1. 3, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 2. 42, 2.

<sup>38</sup> History, 2. 69, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Agricola, 13. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Germany, 33. 2. .

above everything else, including their Republican sentiments.<sup>41</sup> His almost sneering tour that led Furneaux to suggest a 'growing scepticism' could be explained by the difficulty Tacitus had in reconciling the Stoic doctrine of Providence, a God who cared, with the problem of 'permitted evil' and injustice which he witnessed.

One may add, at this point, that Tacitus' interest in philosophy was probably the same as that of his father-in-law about whom he says,

I remember that he used to tell us how in his early youth he would have imbibed a keener love of philosophy than became a Roman and a Senator, had not his mother's good sense checked his excited and ardent spirit. It was the case of a lofty and aspiring soul craving with more eagerness than caution the beauty and splendour of great and glorious renown. But it was soon mellowed by reason and experience, and he retained from his learning that most difficult of lessons -- moderation.<sup>42</sup>

If one regards the eulogy to his father-in-law as an expression of Tacitus' own feelings, then it is possible that he also did not regard the deep study of philosophy as a good thing for the senator, but saw the value of certain Stoic ideals such as courage, moderation, mercy, tranquility which he admired in his beloved father-in-law and which by the way, were practised by the true Roman.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Cf. note 18 above; in his praise for Agricola he pointed out that some men (perhaps selfishly) sought a glorious death "in nullum rei publicae usum", Agricola, 42. 5.

<sup>42</sup>Agricola, 4.

<sup>43</sup>John Paul Armleder in an article "Tacitus' Attitude to Philosophy" in The Classical Bulletin, Vol. 38, pp. 89-91, takes the opposite view. After examining the various tenets and ideals of Stoicism mentioned or admired by Tacitus, he concludes that Tacitus was a dedicated Stoic and adds, "Actually there is as much philosophy expressed or implied in Tacitus' biography of Agricola as in many of Seneca's moral essays. In fact, the Agricola could be used as a text book of the system. This is Tacitus' answer to those who believe he distrusted philosophy and philosophies."



Tacitus' tendency towards Scepticism or at least his lack of conviction could also be explained in the blatant misuse of the philosophical and religious ideals on which Roman government was founded. Was "Providence" involved in the choice of Domitian? Does one still believe in the divine when Domitian claims the title "Dominus et Deus"? Why did Divine Providence not intervene and spare Titus? He seemed to be the better man. M. P. Charlesworth, recognizing this problem makes reference to "a retort by Musonius Rufus to some unknown scoffer" in an incident recorded by Arrian, "After Galba's murder a man said to Musonius, 'Well, is the world governed by Providence now?' But he replied, 'Surely I never deduced superficially from Galba that the world is governed by Providence'. To this Charlesworth adds, "That the world was governed by Providence was a cardinal dogma of the Stoics, and as a result some awkward questions had to be answered."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>M. P. Charlesworth, "Providentia and Aeternitas" in Harvard Theological Review 29 (1936), pp. 107-132.

#### IV. The Professional and Non-professional Philosophies

##### a) General Remarks

The Romans did not develop a new philosophy; rather, they adapted the Hellenistic philosophies (Epicureanism, Stoicism and Cynicism, which were discussed earlier). These philosophies, with their emphasis on personal conduct and their strong ethical content have seemed to indicate a "failure of nerve" in Greek philosophical thought and indeed flourished at a time when the great age of Greece was past. In the same way they seem to come to prominence in Rome at the point at which the great, victorious Republic was drawing to a close. Indeed the Roman people, in exchange for peace, surrendered, perhaps unwittingly, their Republic to Augustus, and only after his death did they realize that the Republic too was forever dead; many were aware that attempts at resuscitating the Republic was futile, but to a few the dream of Republic was more than a mere myth or fancy. (For example, Vestinus, according to Tacitus, was not included in the Pisonian conspiracy because of his strong Republican sympathies.)

In keeping with their views on politics and public life,<sup>2</sup> little is heard of the Epicureans in the times about which Tacitus writes, but

---

<sup>1</sup>Annals 15. 52, 4. Wirszubski, (Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome) adds, "There were plots against the lives of nearly all the emperors from Augustus to Domitian, but the object of the conspirators was to remove the Princes of the day, not to abolish the Principate . . . . Republicanism was no longer considered practical politics. p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>See above, Chapter 2, note 10.

the Stoics and Cynics are to be found throughout this period. The influence of Neo-Pythagoreanism<sup>3</sup> is to be found in writers such as Seneca and Pliny and there is a suggestion that Tacitus at one point made reference to an "incipient Neo-Platonist" school.<sup>4</sup>

During the period described by Tacitus, the preachers, moralists, satirists, teachers, some of the government supporters and the "opposition" are all "philosophers". While from the lower classes and a few of the upper class<sup>5</sup> the Eastern religions such as Mithraism, the religion of Isis and Serapis and Christianity drew many converts; it is likely that for the upper classes, philosophy took the place of religion.

Among the better known philosophers we hear in Tacitus of Musonius Rufus the teacher of Epictetus, the enigmatic Seneca himself, Publius Celer, teacher and later accuser of Barea Soranus and the dedicated leaders of the "opposition", Thrasea Paetus (under Nero) and Helvidius Priscus (under Vespasian). Demetrius the Cynic emerges as the only truly

---

<sup>3</sup>The Neo-Pythagoreans "preached that the soul might be purified by prayer and discipline -- i.e. by purely human means, not by faith or rite -- and so be separated from the body." C. G. Starr, Civilization and the Caesars, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup>Syme, op. cit., p. 525, commenting on Tacitus' philosophical digression, Annals 6, 22. 1, quoted in Chapter III above, suggests that "the second school (See Chapter III, note 26 above) referred to might not be Stoic but incipient "Neo-Platonist". Plotinus, the principal representative of this philosophy, "asserted that the human soul could by itself, without divine aid, rise to . . . purity and gain an ecstatic union with the One", Starr, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. for example, Histories 4. 81, 82, for Vespasian's interest in the religion of Serapis.

professional philosopher of note<sup>6</sup> and the chief exponent of the Cynic philosophy; in this role he is admired as the friend of Thræsea and Seneca<sup>7</sup> and roundly criticized as the defender of Publius Celer.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that the most frequent references to philosophers occur in the descriptions of the fates met by the victims of the principate. Thus we hear of Barea Soranus<sup>9</sup> and his daughter Servilia,<sup>10</sup> Cassius Asclepiodotus,<sup>11</sup> Ostorius Scapula,<sup>12</sup> Rubellius Plautus,<sup>13</sup> Publius Anteius,<sup>14</sup> Arulenus Rusticus the impetuous young tribune<sup>15</sup> and Paconius Agrippinus.<sup>16</sup> There was also Seneca's nephew, Lucan the poet, conspirator and coward who shamelessly named his mother in the Pisonian

---

<sup>6</sup>Armleder, in "Tacitus and Professional Philosophers," Classical Bulletin, 37 (April, 1961), pp. 90-93, refers to all the above-mentioned philosophers as professional but we tend to agree with Hadas who says that "the Greeks were professional scholars and teachers; no Roman gentleman would be either." Hadas, op. cit., p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup>Annals, 16. 34, 2.

<sup>8</sup>Histories, 4. 40.

9 & <sup>10</sup>Annals, 16. 30, 2-31, 3; 16. 33, 2.

<sup>11</sup>Annals, 16. 33, 1.

<sup>12</sup>Annals, 16. 15.

<sup>13</sup>Annals, 14. 58 + 59.

<sup>14</sup>Annals, 16. 14, 2.

<sup>15</sup>Agricola, 2. 1, Tacitus describes him as "flagrans iuvenis" in Annals, 16. 26, 6.

<sup>16</sup>Annals, 61. 33, 3.

conspiracy in an effort to save his neck from the executioner's sword.<sup>17</sup>

Another victim whose death was described by Tacitus in great detail was Petronius Arbiter. This man had shown his capabilities as governor of Bithynia and as consul and won Nero's admiration as an authority on luxury and pleasure. Later he was to fall victim to the machinations of Tigellinus "who looked on him as a rival and even his superior in the science of Pleasure."<sup>18</sup> Tacitus' portrayal of Petronius seems to be fair and accurate; one may even suggest that there is a great deal of admiration in his description of this man who was no ordinary spendthrift "but a man of refined luxury." Indeed, as Professor Bagnani points out, "Tacitus gives him two full chapters, twice as much as he give Lucan."<sup>19</sup>

With regard to Caius Petronius, I ought to dwell a little on his antecedents. His days he passed in sleep, his nights in the business and pleasures of life. Indolence had raised him to fame, as energy raises others, and he was reckoned not a debauchee, and spendthrift, like most of those who squander their substance, but a man of refined luxury. And indeed his talk and doings, the freer they were and the more show of carelessness they exhibited, were the better liked, for their look of natural simplicity. Yet as pro-consul of Bithynia and soon afterwards as consul, he showed himself as a man of vigour and equal to business. Then falling back into vice or affecting vice, he was chosen by Nero to be one of his few intimate associates, as a critic in matters of taste, while the emperor thought nothing charming or elegant in luxury unless Petronius had expressed to him his approval of it. Hence jealousy on the part of Tigellinus, who looked on him as a rival and even his superior in the science of pleasure. And so he worked on the prince's cruelty, which dominated every other

---

<sup>17</sup>Annals, 15. 49, 2; 15. 26, 4 and 15. 70, 1.

<sup>18</sup>Annals, 16. 18.

<sup>19</sup>Gilbert Bagnani, Arbiter of Elegance, p. 25.

passion, charging Petronius with having been the friend of Scaevinus, bribing a slave to become informer, robbing him of the means of defence, and hurrying into prison the greater part of his domestics.<sup>20</sup>

His life was a full one, and his death most admirable. Tacitus' description shows a man who lived with the knowledge that death could come at any moment, and was ready to die. One may agree with Bagnani that Tacitus was full of admiration for Petronius although for an entirely different reason. Bagnani suggests that "since Petronius was not one of the more important political figures of the time "the interest that Tacitus so clearly shows must be due to some other reason, and that was literary."<sup>21</sup> One would think that Tacitus the moralist was struck by the inner strength of a man who proved himself superior to men of the genre of Lucan and in some ways even of Seneca with his utter contempt for Nero, for it was Petronius who dared to write and send to Nero a chronique scandaleuse and did not debase himself to flatter the emperor in his will as did many others. Tacitus describes his end as follows:

It happened at the time that the emperor was on his way to Campania and that Petronius, after going as far as Cumae, was there detained. He bore no longer the suspense of fear or of hope. Yet he did not fling away his life with precipitate haste, but having made an incision in his veins and then, according to his humour, bound them up, he again opened them, while he conversed with his friends, not in a serious strain or on topics that might win for him the glory of courage. And he listened to them as they repeated, not thoughts on the immortality of the soul or on the theories of philosophers, but light poetry and playful verses. To some of his slaves he gave liberal presents, a flogging to others. He dined, indulged himself

---

<sup>20</sup>Annals, 16. 18.

<sup>21</sup>Bagnani, loc. cit.

in sleep, that death, though forced upon him, might have a natural appearance. Even in his will he did not, as did many in their last moments, flatter Nero or Tigellinus or any other of the men in power. On the contrary, he described fully the prince's shameful excesses, with the names of his male and female companions and their novelties in debauchery, and sent the account under seal to Nero. Then he broke his signet-ring, that it might not be subsequently available for imperilling others.<sup>22</sup>

He was perhaps the most outstanding exponent of the decadent Epicureanism that was prevalent in the Empire; his devotion to his philosophy was certainly sincere and his death as described by Tacitus was no less worthy of praise than that of a Thrasea or a Seneca. Perhaps we may agree with Professor Bagnani on this point when he says, "I cannot help feeling that, in his description of the death of Petronius, the Stoic Tacitus was uncomfortably aware that the way this dandy met his death was far more dignified than the Stoic posturings of Seneca or Thrasea."<sup>23</sup>

There is one other class of philosophers who are treated by Tacitus with nothing but contempt; these were the men who debased themselves and prostituted philosophy by providing entertainment for Nero and his court. "He would also bestow some leisure after his banquets on the teachers of philosophy, for he enjoyed the wrangles of opposing dogmatists. And some there were who liked to exhibit their gloomy looks, as one of the amusements of the courts."<sup>24</sup> Furneaux in a footnote to this passage says,

---

<sup>22</sup>Annals, 16. 19.

<sup>23</sup>Bagnani, loc. cit.

<sup>24</sup>Annals, 14. 16, 3.

"These appear to have been Stoics of a low type who for the honour of being invited at all, were willing 'inter oblectamenta regio spectari, i.e.. to parade their seriousness for the jest of the court. Philosophers were frequently attached to the house of emperors and great citizens, but usually in an honoured position."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Furneaux, note on Annals, 14. 16, 3.



(b) Musonius, Thrasea, and Other Stoics

Seneca who was at first tutor and advisor, later 'prime minister' and finally victim of the tyrant, Nero, was the philosopher to be mentioned most frequently by Tacitus, but as was noted earlier there were many other 'victims'<sup>1</sup> whose only crime, it would appear, was their adherence to the Stoic doctrine and in some cases, their 'republican sympathies'. Foremost among these Stoics was Musonius Rufus whom Tacitus mentions only twice in the Annals<sup>2</sup> and three times in the Histories<sup>3</sup> but whose importance and influence as a Stoic ~~were~~ so significant that Arnold suggests, "the influence of Musonius was so great that we may almost regard him as a third founder of the philosophy".<sup>4</sup>

From Tacitus we learn that he allied himself with the opposition, being a friend of Rubellius Plautus<sup>5</sup> that he was suspected of complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy and was banished by the emperor.<sup>6</sup> This Rubellius Plautus is perhaps worthy of mention among the philosophers, for while he has not been described as an outstanding Stoic philosopher, his involvement with Musonius Rufus and Barea Soranus, his adoption of the dangerous tenets of the Stoics together with his dynastic blood -- he was the great

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. part (a) above.

<sup>2</sup>Annals, 14. 59. 2; 15. 71, 9.

<sup>3</sup>Histories, 3. 81; 4. 10; 4. 40.

<sup>4</sup>Arnold, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>5</sup>Annals, 14. 59, 2.

<sup>6</sup>Annals, 15. 71, 9.

grandson of Tiberius<sup>7</sup> -- made him an object of fear in the eyes of Nero and his advisor Ofonius Tigellinus. Nero's fears were not entirely unfounded, for although Tacitus does not suggest that Rubellius entertained any imperial ambitions, he makes it quite clear on more than one occasion that Rubellius was regarded as good material for the throne.

There is an alleged plot in favour of Rubellius whereby Agrippina, Nero's mother, with her eyes on the throne, purposed "to encourage in revolutionary designs Rubellius Plautus, who on his mother's side was as nearly connected as Nero with the Divine Augustus; and then by marrying him and making him emperor, again seize control of the state."<sup>8</sup> Tacitus tells us nothing of Plautus' views on the matter but later we find that "the first hint that the Stoic sect might be a danger to Nero emerges unobtrusively, with Rubellius Plautus."<sup>9</sup> This is in connection with the appearance of a comet which in popular belief portended a change of ruler.

A comet meantime blazed in the sky, which in popular opinion always portends revolutions to kingdoms. So people began to ask, as if Nero was already dethroned, who was to be elected. In every one's mouth was the name of Rubellius Plautus, who inherited through his mother the high nobility of the Julian family. He was himself attached to the ideas of our ancestors; his manners were austere, his home was one of purity and seclusion, and the more he lived in retirement from fear, the more fame did he acquire. Popular talk was confirmed by an interpretation put with similar credulity on a flashing of lightning. While Nero was reclining at dinner in his house named Sublaquem on the Simburine lake, the table with the banquet was struck and shattered, and as this happened close to Tibur, from which town Plautus derived

---

<sup>7</sup>Annals, 6: 27, 1; 13. 19, 3.

<sup>8</sup>Annals, 13. 19, 3.

<sup>9</sup>Syme, op. cit., p. 555.

his origin on his father's side, people believed him to be the man marked out by divine providence; and he was encouraged by that numerous class, whose eager and often mistaken ambition it is to attach themselves prematurely to some new and hazardous cause. This alarmed Nero, and he wrote a letter to Plautus, bidding "him consider the tranquility of Rome and withdraw himself from mischievous gossip. He had ancestral possessions in Asia, where he might enjoy his youth safely and quietly." And so thither Plautus retired with his wife Antistia and a few intimate friends.<sup>10</sup>

After his forced retirement to Asia, his name is revived by Tigellinus who says, "Plautus again, with his great wealth, does not so much as affect a love of repose, but he flaunts before us imitations of the old Romans, and assumes the self-consciousness of the Stoics along with a philosophy, which makes men restless, and eager for a busy life."<sup>11</sup> The end was near, and even though he was advised by his father-in-law to "avoid the obvious refuge of a coward's death"<sup>12</sup> yet he submitted calmly to the centurion's sword, perhaps encouraged by the advice of his friends. We say 'perhaps' since Tacitus says, "Some say that another message came to him from his father-in-law, representing that no dreadful peril hung over him and that two teachers of philosophy, Coeranus from Greece and Musonius from Etruria, advised him to await death with firmness rather than lead a precarious and anxious life."<sup>13</sup>

From the evidence before us it would be safe to say that Tacitus' sympathies lay with Rubellius. Nowhere in the narrative does he allow

---

<sup>10</sup> Annals, 14. 22, 1-5.

<sup>11</sup> Annals, 14. 57, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Annals, 14. 58, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Annals, 14. 59, 2.

any hint of Rubellius even raising an arm in self-defence let alone actively plotting against Nero. Where there is a suggestion of Rubellius' seeking the help of Corbulo, Tacitus attributes it to "fama":

It was less of a secret that there was a design to murder Plautus, as his life was dear to many. The distance, too, by land and sea, and the interval of time, had given rise to rumours, and the popular story was that he had tampered with Corbulo, who was then at the head of great armies, and would be a special mark for danger, if illustrious and innocent men were to be destroyed. Again Asia, it is said, from its partiality for the young man, had taken up arms, and the soldiers sent to do the crime, not being sufficient in number or decided in purpose, and, finding themselves unable to execute their orders, had gone over to the new cause. These absurdities, like all popular gossip, gathered strength from the idle leisure of a credulous society.<sup>14</sup>

One has to agree with Syme who says, "Tacitus conjures up all his resources to embellish, and to magnify, Rubellius Plautus, admirable in the conduct of his life, courageous and constant to the end."<sup>15</sup>

This was the fate of a friend of Musonius, who displayed, as we shall soon see, some of the courage that was characteristic of Musonius who, as was noted above was exiled by Nero. We gather that he [Musonius] was recalled from exile, presumably by Galba<sup>16</sup> and we see him next attempting to talk sense to a set of blood-thirsty soldiers who almost rewarded him with death for his lecture.<sup>17</sup> His next appearance in Tacitus' works is on the occasion of his impeachment of Publius Celer the 'false' Stoic who informed against his patron Barea Soranus, the friend of Musonius.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Annals, 14. 58, 1 & 2.

<sup>15</sup>Syme, op. cit., p. 576.

<sup>16</sup>Lutz, Cora E., "Musonius Rufus: 'The Roman Socrates'", Yale Classical Studies Vol. X.

<sup>17</sup>Histories, 3. 81.

<sup>18</sup>Histories, 4. 10; 4, 40.

The rest that is known of Musonius' life has been gleaned from various sources and recorded by Cora Lutz,<sup>19</sup> M. P. Charlesworth,<sup>20</sup> A. C. Van Geytenbeck<sup>21</sup> who all agree in their findings. From these biographies we discover that during his exile to Gyara, Musonius was not only not disheartened, but that he used the island prison as a meeting place for his coterie of students and in addition improved living conditions for the people of the island by discovering a spring in the hitherto waterless rock.

There are yet two other tributes to this man's influence in the Roman Empire: When Vespasian at the instigation of Musianus banished all the philosophers in 71, Musonius was especially exempted by the Emperor, and later he exposed himself to ridicule and hostility by protesting to the Athenians against their practice of holding bloody gladiatorial games in the theatre of Dionysius which had also to serve as a setting for a religious festival.<sup>22</sup>

Important as are the sayings and lectures of Musonius that have come down to us, reference to them will be made in this study only in terms of the relationship they bear to Tacitus' verdict on Musonius. Tacitus' first reference to Musonius, which is at the same time in no

---

<sup>19</sup>Cf. note 16 above.

<sup>20</sup>Charlesworth, M. P., Five Men.

<sup>21</sup>Van Geytenbeck, A.C., Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe.

<sup>22</sup>Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 36; Lutz, op. cit., p. 7.

way a judgment, gives us a clue to the philosopher's belief: "Some say that . . . teachers of philosophy, Coeranus from Greece and Musonius from Etruria, advised him [Rubellius Plautus] to await death with firmness rather than lead a precarious and anxious life."<sup>23</sup> As evidenced in some of the fragments of his sayings,<sup>24</sup> we see also that as a Stoic, Musonius subscribes to the theory of 'reasonable departure'. Tacitus' first judgment of the philosopher, however, comes in the Annals<sup>25</sup> where he says, "It was the splendour of their name which drove Verginius Flavus and Musonius Rufus into exile. Verginius encouraged the studies of our youth by his eloquence; Rufus by the teaching of philosophy." Tacitus obviously recognizes the greatness of the Stoic teacher.

When in the Histories he relates the incident of Musonius' attempt to talk peace to the frenzied soldiers, Tacitus tells us that:

". . . He mingled with the troops, and enlarging on the blessings of peace and the perils of war, began to admonish the armed crowd. Many thought it ridiculous; more thought it tiresome; some were ready to throw him down and trample him under foot, had he not yielded to the warnings of the more orderly and the threats of the others and ceased to display his ill-timed wisdom."<sup>26</sup>

Not only does Tacitus brand the attempt as intempestiva sapientia but he goes further in that he does not record one reaction that was favourable to Musonius' venture. The situation was indeed fraught with danger not

---

<sup>23</sup>Annals, 14. 59, 2.

<sup>24</sup>Fragments, XXVIII, XXIX, XLIII found in Lutz, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup>Annals, 15. 71, 9.

<sup>26</sup>Histories, 3. 81.

only for Musonius but for everyone in the city, since the Vestal Virgins were sent with a letter from Vitellius to Antonius and, as Cora E. Lutz notes, "A man with the influence and following, not to mention the persuasiveness of Musonius would be bound to see his duty in the course of action which Musonius determined upon."<sup>27</sup> Armleder suggests that, "This is by no means a condemnation of Musonius or philosophy, but means only that Tacitus felt that the particular circumstances prevented a proper reception of Musonius' philosophical tenets."<sup>28</sup> This may be so, but it is more likely that his intempestiva sapientia is a strong condemnation of the philosopher's optimism since wisdom is never ill-timed. Indeed the phrase ought to be regarded as a sneer since the very word "wisdom" implies proper timing and judgment. If however the venture had been successful, as in the case of Dio Chrysostom, cited by Lutz,<sup>29</sup> the action might have been labelled otherwise.

If there is some question about Tacitus' attitude towards Musonius' attempt to placate the soldiers, there is no question or disagreement as to his judgment in the case of Musonius' condemnation of Publius Celer:

It was then determined that the cause of Musonius Rufus against Publius Celer should be again brought on. Publius was condemned and the expiation was made to the shade of Soranus. The day thus marked by an example of public justice was not barren of distinction to individuals. Musonius was thought to have fulfilled the righteous duty

---

<sup>27</sup>Lutz, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>28</sup>Armleder, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>29</sup>Lutz, op. cit., p. 16.

of an accuser, but men spoke very differently of Demetrius, a disciple of the Cynical school of philosophy, who pleaded the cause of a notorious criminal by appeals to corrupt influences rather than by fair argument. Publius himself in his peril, had neither spirit nor power of speech left.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Musonius by the 'righteousness' of his purpose and the success of his venture, wins the unqualified approval of the historian. Publius Celer was a delator, a traitor who destroyed his patron and in turn deserved no mercy. One wonders though, whether Musonius deserved as much praise as he received since his action was not consistent with his preaching. He opposed the idea of retaliation and revenge in several discourses;<sup>31</sup> it is amazing that he did not try like Lycurgus to reform the public enemy, Publius Celer, and say later, "This man I received from you an insolent and violent creature; I return him to you a reasonable man and a good citizen."<sup>32</sup>

Probably Demetrius the Cynic was morally justified in defending Publius Celer, not because he was innocent but because of the "corrupt influences" that did indeed exist. Armleder is on the right track when, in terms of Tacitus' own statement, he suggests that "the indictment of Demetrius was not a judgment on Cynic philosophy, but it was a castigation of the lack of sincerity and excessive ambition in Demetrius."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Histories, 4. 40.

<sup>31</sup>Van Geytenbeck, op. cit., pp. 134ff. discusses this topic fully, noting fragments X, XXXIX and XLI.

<sup>32</sup>Musonius, fragment XXXIX.

<sup>33</sup>Armleder, op. cit., p. 91.



However, since Tacitus does not give a summary of Demetrius' argument and since he admits that "Publius himself in his peril had neither power nor speech left," one is led to believe that Tacitus allows his bias and hatred to outweigh his sense of justice which rebelled against allowing a man, however guilty, to be condemned undefended. Perhaps Dudley is correct in saying, "It is hard to say what ambition Demetrius could be serving in thus championing an unpopular case."<sup>34</sup> Evidently, Tacitus' judgment in the cases of Musonius and Demetrius concerning the trial of Publius Celer is tailored to suit his hostility towards the delatores and his anxiety to see this curse of the empire removed. Here we have indeed 'an example of public justice,'<sup>35</sup> not so much in the condemnation of Publius Celer, as in the fact that he had the opportunity of a fair trial with his prosecutor and defense attorney, each a distinguished philosopher.

Before describing Barea Soranus as "virtue itself"<sup>36</sup> Tacitus introduces him as consul elect under Claudius who moved that the freedman Pallas be rewarded with the 'decorations of the praetorship and fifteen million sesterces for his servile proposal to the emperor concerning the marriage of freewomen to slaves.'<sup>37</sup> While it is difficult to believe

---

<sup>34</sup>Dudley, D. R., A History of Cynicism, p. 134.

<sup>35</sup>Histories, 4 40, quoted above; see note 31. In the case of Petronius, Tacitus charged that Tigellinus "robbed him of the means of defence" (Annals, 16 18, 5). Does Tacitus believe in a fair trial for his innocent victims only?

<sup>36</sup>Annals, 61, 21, 1.

<sup>37</sup>Annals, 12. 53, 3.

that Barea, when he proposed that 'vote of thanks' for Pallas was the high-principled Stoic of later years, a closer examination of the situation may reveal that he probably was "virtue itself". According to the Elder Pliny<sup>38</sup> this decree was passed "iubente Agrippina" and if this were so, we have before us a spiritless politician who is willing to save his neck at any cost. Even worse is the thought that he might have been seeking fame and advancement; the Younger Pliny, without naming him, roundly condemns his action in this question: "But who is so crazy as to desire advancement won through his own and his country's dishonour, in a state where the chief privilege of its highest office is that of being the first to pay compliments to Pallas in the Senate?"<sup>39</sup> Surely, were he sentenced to death "iubente Agrippina" for his refusal to co-operate in passing this decree, there would have been no question of his patriotism or his martyrdom. We see also that Barea was joined by no less a person than C. Scipio.

Stewart Irwin Oost in The Career of M. Antonius Pallas<sup>40</sup> gives us a different slant on the subject and is therefore worthy of consideration. He points out that "as a consul designate he [Barea] probably spoke first after the Emperor on this occasion, and could well do little else than

---

<sup>38</sup>Furneaux, op. cit., commenting on this decree notes, "The Elder Pliny . . . describes it as passed 'iubente Agrippina'."

<sup>39</sup>The Younger Pliny: Epistles Bk 8. 6, translated by Betty Radice.

<sup>40</sup>Stewart Irwin Oost, "The Career of M. Antonius Pallas," in American Journal of Philosophy LXXIX (1958), pp. 113-139.

follow the Emperor's wishes. Scipio's statement was certainly ironic (despite Pliny, Ep., VIII, 6, 3); presumably Soranus' speech was also couched in fulsome irony and Scipio underlined it."<sup>41</sup> If this be the case, one can easily understand Tacitus' description of Barea Soranus as "virtue itself", since he was able to show his contempt without indulging in the dangerous game of confrontation. On the other hand, if Barea did indeed act "iubente Agrippina" on such a matter rather than risk his life for something that was so trivial, there is strong evidence from Tacitus' approval of Agricola's policy under Domitian and Seneca's under Nero, that Barea might still have received Tacitus' blessing.

There is no doubt that Barea Soranus was a good administrator in the province of Asia, but it must be admitted that by being closely associated with Rubellius Plautus and by condoning the resistance at Pergamum,<sup>42</sup> however laudable his motives, he did expose himself to Nero's suspicion and finally his wrath.

R. S. Rogers<sup>43</sup> suggests that the true charge against Barea was treason and against his daughter Servilia was complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy; this is only conjecture, well-documented though it be, but he is right in pointing out that Tacitus does not say much about the

---

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>42</sup>Annals, 16. 23, 1 "Barea Soranus . . . passed over without punishment the violence of the citizens of Pergamos in their efforts to hinder Acratus, one of the emperor's freedmen, from carrying off statues and pictures."

<sup>43</sup>R. S. Rogers, "The Tacitean Pattern of a Treason Trial" TAPA, XXXIII, p. 290ff.

charges nor about the chief witness Publius Egnatius Celer. Exactly what Celer said or what confidences he betrayed no one knows, except that it has been suggested that he misrepresented the purpose of Servilia's visit to the astrologers.<sup>44</sup>

In an effort to convince us of Barea's virtue and innocence, Tacitus gives very little information concerning the charges against Barea; we here, only, that he was the friend of Rubellius Plautus and Cassius Asclepiodotus, both of whom were opposed to Nero. Could the true charges against him have to do with treason or revolutionary designs? On the other hand Publius Celer is condemned on the ground that he betrayed Barea Soranus. It is indeed possible that Publius Celer was honest and, like Seneca, felt that co-operation was better than revolution. Perhaps Rogers is even right when he suggests that the real miscarriage of justice occurred in the condemnation of Publius some four years later.<sup>45</sup>

The difficulties surrounding these cases raise again the question of Demetrius the Cynic. We see him lecturing to Thrasea and his friends<sup>46</sup> when Thrasea received the news of the Senate's decision;<sup>47</sup> later he is

---

<sup>44</sup>Furneaux, *op. cit.*, note on Annals, 16. 32. In Annals, 61. 31, 1 Servilia is charged with selling "her bridal presents or stript her neck of its ornaments to raise money for the performance of magical rites." This consultation of the astrologers "really occurred through filial affection." She "had consulted them, only however, about the safety of her family." Annals, 16. 30, 2.

<sup>45</sup>Rogers, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup>Annals, 16. 34.

<sup>47</sup>The Senate's decision: Thrasea, Soranus, and Servilia were allowed the choice of death. Annals, 16. 33, 2.

admitted with Helvidius into Thrasea's death-chamber -- a faithful friend, even unto death. However, in his attempt to defend Publius Celer, the same Demetrius gains notoriety in the eyes of Tacitus.<sup>48</sup> It is difficult to see how an outspoken critic of every emperor would defend a Neronian "delator" so as to gain notoriety. Miss Toynbee's<sup>49</sup> suggestion that it was "a case, possibly, of the proverbial 'cussedness' and perversity of the Cynic extremists, here reacting against the official and respectable Stoicism" does not solve any problem or answer any question. Dudley<sup>50</sup> and Rogers<sup>51</sup> are probably thinking in the right direction when they suggest that Demetrius served a just cause in that Celer, however guilty, had a right to be represented. This right to representation or defence is nothing new; Tacitus himself, describing the machinations of Tigellinus and Nero and the fate of Petronius, complained that Petronius was robbed "of the means of defense."<sup>52</sup> Also, Pliny says that Thrasea Paetus often said "that there were three kinds of cases which we should undertake: our friends', those which no one else would take on, and those which establish a precedent."<sup>53</sup> One would think that Demetrius was justified

---

<sup>48</sup>Histories, 4. 40: "Musonius was thought to have fulfilled the righteous duty of an accuser, but men spoke very differently of Demetrius, . . . who pleaded the cause of a notorious criminal . . ."

<sup>49</sup>J. M. C. Toynbee, "Dictators and Philosophers in the First Century A.D. in Greece and Rome, Vol. 13 (1944), p. 53.

<sup>50</sup>Dudley, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>51</sup>Rogers, op. cit., p. 294.

<sup>52</sup>Annals, 16. 18, 5 ". . . corrupto ad indicium servo ademptaque defensione et maiore parte familiae in vincla rapta."

<sup>53</sup>Pliny, op. cit., Bk 6. 29.

on any of these grounds in pleading the case of Publius Celer.

Linked closely with the name of Barea Soranus is that of Thrasea Paetus, since Tacitus regarded him also as "Virtue Itself".<sup>54</sup> From Tacitus we learn that he was a Stoic, that he was not always opposed to Nero, that he took part in the Senate and that he was a friend of Seneca. We discover also that he allowed many servile motions to be passed "in silence or with brief assent,"<sup>55</sup> that he later opposed Nero, absented himself from the Senate and was finally accused of leading a 'Republican' opposition to the Principate.<sup>56</sup>

Thrasea makes his first appearance in the Annals when he broke his silence in the Senate to speak on a "very trivial decree"<sup>58</sup> and although Tacitus records Thrasea's explanation for this action, the tone of his language suggests that he is at least mildly critical at this point.

Tacitus quoted him thus:

Thrasea in reply, when his friends asked an explanation, said "that it was not in ignorance of Rome's actual condition that he sought to correct such decrees, but that he was giving what was due to the honour of the senators, in making it evident that those who attended even to the merest trifles, would not disguise their responsibility for important affairs."<sup>57</sup>

Commenting on this episode, Wirszubski says,

---

<sup>54</sup> Cf. footnote 37 above.

<sup>55</sup> Annals, 14. 12, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Annals, 16. 28, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Annals, 13. 49, 5. The "very trivial decree . . . allowed the city of Syracuse to exceed the prescribed number in their gladiatorial shows." Annals, 13. 49, 7.

It appears therefore, that in Thrasea's opinion the State, in the year 58, suffered from the lack of senatorial freedom; by paying undue attention to a trivial subject he wished to show, for the sake of the Senate's honour, that the evasion of important matters was not due to negligence.<sup>58</sup>

It is obvious that Thrasea was not lacking in spirit and independence, as evidenced in his successful opposition to the death sentence for Antistius, a praetor, who was tried in the Senate for "maiestas",<sup>59</sup> and his leaving the senate chamber during the debate following Agrippina's murder.<sup>60</sup> But, as Furneaux points out, even this strong step "receives scant praise from Tacitus."<sup>61</sup> who says, "Thrasea Paetus, who had been used to pass over previous flatteries in silence or with brief assent, then walked out of the Senate, thereby imperilling himself, without communicating to the other senators any impulse towards freedom."<sup>62</sup> One is reminded here of his criticism of men of Thrasea's ilk: ". . .obedience and submission, when joined to activity and vigour, may attain a glory which most men reach only by a perilous career, utterly useless to the state, and closed by an ostentatious death."<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>Wirszubski, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>59</sup>Annals, 14. 48, 5 to 49, 1.

<sup>60</sup>Annals, 14. 12, 2.

<sup>61</sup>Furneaux, op. cit., Introduction to Annals, Vol. III, p. 80.

<sup>62</sup>Annals, 14. 12, 2.

<sup>63</sup>Agricola, 42, 5: quoted above cf. note 18 of Chapter III.

Again Tacitus records another incident of independence on the part of Thrasea at the prosecution of Claudius Timarchus, a Cretan magnate, who by one speech of his had grossly insulted the Senate, ". . . for he had repeatedly declared that it was in his power to decide whether the proconsuls who had governed Crete should receive the thanks of the province."<sup>64</sup> "Thrasea, seizing upon the opportunity, moved that provincials should not be permitted to move a vote of thanks to retiring governors. The historian allows him a firm and dignified speech, with appeal to the ancient relations between mandatories of the imperial people and their subjects."<sup>65</sup> The motion received Nero's blessing and it was decreed that "no one was to propose to any council of our allies that a vote of thanks ought to be given in the Senate to pro-praetors or pro-consuls, and that no one was to discharge such a mission."<sup>66</sup>

We get the first hint of a breach between Thrasea and the Emperor when the former was forbidden to meet Nero to honour the birth of a daughter to Poppaea.<sup>67</sup> However, Tacitus tells us that the breach was healed.<sup>68</sup> It is after the Pisonian conspiracy that we learn of Thrasea playing the intransigent role by absenting himself from the Senate for about three

---

<sup>64</sup> Annals, 15. 20, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Syme, op. cit., p. 556.

<sup>66</sup> Annals, 15. 22, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Annals, 15. 23, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Annals, 15. 23. 6: On this point Furneaux notes that even though Tacitus attributes this report to rumour nevertheless, "in the following sentence (unde . . . gliscebat) he adopts it and remarks upon it."



years, including the important occasion when Poppaea was to be deified<sup>69</sup> as a result of Nero's fatal kick.<sup>70</sup> He is impeached by his old enemy Capito Cossutianus and charged with treason and revolutionary designs.<sup>71</sup> Progressing from absenteeism and intransigence, Capito charged him with being a member of a sect that "gave birth to the Tiberones and Favonii, names hateful even to the old republic" and warned the Emperor of the potential danger of a rival of the Bruti. Damning as those charges are, there is no evidence of treason; yet he was condemned as a traitor.

This situation has led to a great deal of speculation by Rogers who, after agreeing with Miss Toynbee's thesis<sup>72</sup> that "certain of the Stoics, who, while not disposed unfavourably towards monarchy, disapproved vehemently the throne's present occupant and were connected with the conspiracy of 65," suggests that Thrasea had been advocating the overthrow of the government by force and violence.<sup>73</sup> While this view may be largely conjectural, it cannot be denied that Nero felt insecure with Thrasea a thorn in the flesh.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup>Annals, 16. 21, 2.

<sup>70</sup>Annals, 16. 6, 1: "After the conclusion of the games Poppaea died from a casual outburst of rage in her husband, who felled her with a kick when she was pregnant."

<sup>71</sup>Annals, 16. 22. Capito's speech is long, impassioned and convincing.

<sup>72</sup>J. M. C. Toynbee, op. cit.

<sup>73</sup>Rogers, op. cit., p. 290.

<sup>74</sup>Note, for example, Nero's boast, cited in note 69 above, that the breach between them was healed.

Indeed these two men were so diametrically opposed to each other with regard to personality, tastes and ambitions that it is possible as Boissier<sup>75</sup> points out that the opposition was moral rather than political, that they detected the vices, not the power of the Caesars.

The rest of the charge against Thrasea suggests that he and his followers were Republicans. Boissier, when he says, "Je ne voudrais pas prétendre sans doute qu'il n'y eut point de républicains alors, mais je crois qu'ils étaient rares . . . ." <sup>76</sup> suggests that Republicanism was not widespread enough to serve as a threat to the principate. Miss Walker<sup>77</sup> goes on to show that Republicanism was an academic agitation and nothing more. She points out also, and rightly, that "the Stoics tended to identify themselves with the Republican tradition since the most famous Stoics of the past, such as Brutus and Cato had been anti-Caesarian."<sup>78</sup> The identification was more with the Republican tradition and the high standards Cato stood for, than with the idea of Republicanism itself. The conflict between Thrasea and the Emperor was personal; indeed Capito's words lend weight to the argument that the opposition was moral rather than political and that the objection was to Nero himself rather than to the principate: "Thrasea has his followers or rather his satellites, who copy not indeed as yet the audacious tone of his sentiments, but only his

---

<sup>75</sup>Gaston Boissier, L'Opposition sous les Césars, pp. 102, 103.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>77</sup>Walker, op. cit., pp. 171-173.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

manners and his looks, a sour and gloomy set, bent on making your mirthfulness a reproach to you."<sup>79</sup>

It is interesting to note that the breach between Thrasea and Nero, as recorded by Tacitus, became evident around 63 A.D. One may ask, "Why was Thrasea not in opposition to Nero before this?" or, "Was it not Thrasea who appealed to the Emperor's clemency on behalf of Antistius<sup>80</sup> who would surely have been condemned to death by the Senate?" There is a strong possibility that Thrasea approved of Nero's administration up to this time. According to Tacitus, the influence of Seneca and Burrus proved to be good for Nero and one would think for Rome:

These two men guided the Emperor's youth with an unity of purpose seldom found where authority is shared, and though their accomplishments were wholly different, they had equal influence. Burrus, with his soldier's discipline and severe manners, Seneca, with lessons of eloquence and a dignified courtesy, strove alike to confine the frailty of the prince's youth, should he loathe virtue, within allowable indulgences.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed it was during the early period of his reign that Nero displayed one of his greatest acts of mercy:

Then came an act of mercy to Plautius Lateranus, who had been degraded from his rank for adultery with Messalina, and whom he now restored, assuring them of his clemency in a number of speeches which Seneca, to show the purity of his teaching or to display his genius, published to the world by the Emperor's mouth.<sup>82</sup>

It was after the death of Burrus and the retirement of Seneca, when Nero had come under the influence of the likes of Tigellinus and had given

---

<sup>79</sup>Annals, 16. 22 cf. note 72 above.

<sup>80</sup>Annals, 14. 48+49.

<sup>81</sup>Annals, 13. 2, 1.

<sup>82</sup>Annals, 13. 11, 2.

free rein to the satisfying of his lusts, that Thrasea began to oppose him openly, for power in the hands of an evil man becomes power misused. Wirszubski, commenting on Thrasea's opposition to Nero says:

Nero's perversity made him a charioteer, an actor, a matricide; but it was his power that made him an emperor at the same time. And this is what mattered. Nero made the Principate a tyranny; his follies which were applauded, and his crimes, which went unpunished, only emphasized the enormity of that tyranny. Thrasea was not the embodiment of Stoic virtue outraged by vice; he was in the first place a Roman senator who tried to assert his freedom and dignity in the face of the malignant despot of Rome.<sup>83</sup>

From the evidence made available by Tacitus, one can only conclude that Thrasea's opposition to Nero was moral rather than political, against the abuse of the principate rather than against the principate itself; not necessarily against Nero's vices,<sup>84</sup> but against their effect.

Whatever the truth may be or, whether or not the charges were valid, whether or not Tacitus did indeed suppress the true nature of the charges is a matter that goes beyond the scope of this study. The fact is that Thrasea was condemned and he committed suicide in the presence of two of his most intimate companions. Needless to say, Tacitus has made a true martyr of Thrasea, but it is very clear that he does not shower him with the same praise that he reserves for his father-in-law, Agricola who at all times co-operated with Domitian. The heroic actions are often questioned and sometimes criticized; we get the impression that Tacitus is interested in Thrasea's stoicism and his actions only when they are in

---

<sup>83</sup>Wirszubski, op. cit., p. 143.

<sup>84</sup>Pliny quotes Thrasea thus: "Anyone who hates faults hates mankind." Pliny, Epistles, Bk 8, 22.

harmony with the Tacitean ideal. Despite his praise for martyrs of the principate and criticism for the cowardly, Tacitus, it appears, wanted stability at any cost and was impatient with any Roman who in his opposition to the principate "rocked the boat".

As he died, Thrasea passed the torch to his son-in-law Helvidius Priscus, who appeared first in the Annals in a passing reference by Tacitus:

. . . Helvidius Priscus, a tribune of the people, followed up a personal quarrel he had with Obultronus Sabinus, one of the officials of the exchequer, by insinuating that he stretched his right of confiscation with merciless rigour against the poor.<sup>85</sup>

We see him charged later with the "same madness" of his father-in-law,<sup>86</sup> pitied by some that "he was to suffer for an innocent alliance,"<sup>87</sup> banished from Italy along with Paconius<sup>88</sup> and finally with Demetrius in the death-chamber of his father-in-law. In the Histories however, he takes on a more significant role. We discover that he was recalled from exile by Galba,<sup>89</sup> as praetor-elect he opposed Vitellius<sup>90</sup> and gave his opinion on a matter of state.<sup>91</sup> Even more interesting is his feud with Marcellus Eprius, the informer against Thrasea.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup>Annals, 13. 28, 5.

<sup>86</sup>Annals, 16. 28, 2.

<sup>87</sup>Annals, 16. 29, 2.

<sup>88</sup>Annals, 16. 33, 3.

<sup>89</sup>Histories, 4. 16.

<sup>90</sup>Histories, 2. 91.

<sup>91</sup>Histories, 2. 91; 4. 4, 6.

<sup>92</sup>Histories, 4. 6-8.

It is in this feud and his attempt to impeach Eprius that we see the old Helvidius of the Annals when he was "a tribune of the people"<sup>93</sup> for the quarrel, since it concerns Thrasea, his father-in-law, is again personal. One of his first acts as praetor-elect was to impeach Eprius, but he was forced to drop his suit since there was a split in the Senate. However, the condemnation of Publius Celer, was the "signal for vengeance on the informers"<sup>94</sup> and once again Helvidius sought to impeach his enemy in vain. According to Dudley, "It was a crushing blow for the policy of Helvidius Priscus and it may well be that the headstrong bitterness of his later opposition was largely occasioned by the disappointment of that day."<sup>95</sup>

The Helvidius Priscus we find in the extant books of Tacitus is not exactly the same person depicted by Suetonius and Dio Cassius -- a loud exhibitionist who is extremely tactless and more interested in upsetting the government than in serving in the Senate. Describing Vespasian as a fair and merciful emperor, Suetonius mentions Helvidius' treatment of the Emperor as a case in point:

Although Helvidius was the only one who greeted him on his return from Syria by his private name of "Vespasian", and moreover in his praetorship left the Emperor unhonoured and unmentioned in all his edicts, he did not show anger until by the extravagance of his railing Helvidius had all but degraded him.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup>Cf. note 86 above.

<sup>94</sup>Histories, 4, 40.

<sup>95</sup>Dudley, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>96</sup>Suetonius, Divus Vespasianus, XV.

However, since it is not our task or purpose to write a biography of Helvidius but to discuss Tacitus' verdict on the man, we shall concern ourselves with the veracity of these statements only in terms of the justification of Tacitus' verdict on Helvidius.

In a brief but attractive biographical sketch, Tacitus tells of Helvidius:

In early youth he devoted his distinguished talents to the loftiest pursuits, not wishing, as do many, to cloak under an imposing name a life of indolence, but to be able to enter upon public life with a spirit fortified against the chances of fortune. He followed those teachers of philosophy who hold nothing to be good but what is honourable, nothing evil but what is base, and who refuse to count among things good or evil, power, rank or indeed anything not belonging to the mind. While still holding the quaestorship, he was selected by Paetus Thrasea to be his son-in-law, and from the example of his father-in-law imbibed with peculiar eagerness a love of liberty. As a citizen and as a Senator, as a husband, as a son-in-law, as a friend and in all relations of life, he was ever the same, despising wealth, steadily tenacious of right, and undaunted by danger.<sup>97</sup>

Here Tacitus' praise is high and we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his language. However, in the same breath, he admits that, "There were some who thought him too eager for fame" to which he adds his own verdict, "Indeed the desire for glory is the last infirmity cast off even by the wise."<sup>98</sup> This last statement suggests that Tacitus might have had some reservations about Helvidius. Armleder is right when he says, "this is not to be taken as a condemnation of philosophers,"<sup>99</sup> but his view

---

<sup>97</sup> Histories, 4. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Histories, 4. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Armleder, op. cit., p. 91.

that it "means merely that in the opinion of Tacitus the desire for glory is the final desire to be overcome in the striving for philosophic calms,"<sup>99a</sup> is not altogether acceptable. It is an admission of a shortcoming in a man whom he admires and so his criticism is couched in mild and general terms.

Since we do not have the rest of the Histories, in which Tacitus promised to speak often of Helvidius,<sup>100</sup> we are faced with the task of forming conclusions from incomplete data. According to the evidence before us, Helvidius received more praise than criticism from Tacitus, and why not? He spoke for the liberty of the Senate, he attacked the informers, and best of all took an active part in the governing of Rome. We know also that Tacitus, while he refers to some of Helvidius' faults, does not make an issue of them. Finally in the Agricola, Chapter 2, when Tacitus mentions the names of Thrasea and Helvidius, it is in praise of philosophy and philosophers. This praise, however, must be regarded in the light of the reign of terror he was describing and the panegyric he was about to sing rather than strictly as a "devastating rebuttal against those who maintained that Tacitus disparaged philosophy and philosophers."<sup>101</sup>

It may be safe to say that up to the point where the Histories break off Tacitus approves of Helvidius and his opposition policy which up to this point is mild and virtually harmless. It is evident though

---

<sup>99a</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Histories, 4. 5.

<sup>101</sup>Armleder, op. cit., p. 92.



that he did regard him as an opportunist eager for fame when he described him as following up "a personal quarrel he had with Obultronius Sabinus . . ." <sup>102</sup> and in this respect there might have been some justification for the view that he was an "exhibitionist . . . extremely tactless and more interested in upsetting the government than in serving in the Senate." <sup>103</sup> Frankly, these vindictive and opportunistic actions of Helvidius seem to us to be most un-Stoic and most probably seemed so also to Tacitus.

---

<sup>102</sup>Cf. note 86 above.

<sup>103</sup>Summary, mentioned above, of the views of Suetonius and Dio Cassius. Cf. note 97 above.

## V. Seneca the Philosopher

Seneca makes his first appearance in the extant portion of the Annals in Book 12 as he is recalled from exile and invited by Agrippina to be the tutor of the young prince Domitius. There is no reason to believe that Tacitus introduced the philosopher-statesman in medias res; since Seneca had incurred Gaius' jealousy and wrath and later was a 'victim' of Messalina's intrigues, we can be sure that Tacitus must have mentioned him more than once in the missing portions of the Annals. In relating this episode of his recall, his elevation to the praetorship and his appointment as royal tutor, Tacitus adds the following comment:

She [Agrippina] thought this would be universally welcome, from the celebrity of his attainments, and it was her wish too for the boyhood of Domitius to be trained under so excellent an instructor, and for them to have the benefit of his counsels in their designs on the throne. For Seneca, it was believed, was devoted to Agrippina from a remembrance of her kindness, and an enemy to Claudius from a bitter sense of wrong.<sup>1</sup>

After five years, Seneca was still occupied as supervisor of Nero's studies which "consisted of all available subjects of culture, with two chief limitations according to Suetonius: Nero's mother disapproved of philosophy for a future ruler, and Seneca jealously discouraged the study of the old orators, so that his own modern style might remain Nero's

---

<sup>1</sup>Annals, 12. 8, 3.

ideal."<sup>2</sup> At the death of Claudius, in 54 A.D., he became, together with Burrus, the brains behind the administration. Tacitus informs us that these two men were a good influence on the young ruler, ". . . Seneca, with lessons of eloquence had a dignified courtesy, strove . . . to confine the frailty of the prince's youth, should he loathe virtue, within allowable indulgences."<sup>3</sup> Here, as Syme notes, Tacitus "commends his union of moral strength and social tact -- 'honesta comitas.'"<sup>4</sup>

It was during the early years of his "premiership" that Seneca composed his De Clementia which he addressed to Nero. While this work abounds with flattery and platitudes, it stands as a "model of wise counsel in moderate kingship which Nero might have followed more and with better results."<sup>5</sup> The good advice offered was obviously not followed; in fact the very opposite behaviour ensued. Seneca counsels thus: "Let your own goodness of heart be gradually spread and diffused throughout the whole body of the Empire, and all parts of it will mould themselves into your likeness."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Duff, A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age, p. 163. The reference is to Suetonius, Nero, 52: "a philosophia eum mater auertit, monens imperaturo contrariam esse." The same view is expressed by Tacitus in Agricola 4. 4: ". . . se prima in iuventa studium philosophiae acrius, ultra quam concessum Romano ac senatori, hausisse . . . ." This does not mean that Nero had no philosophical advice since, we shall see later, Seneca addressed his De Clementia to Nero.

<sup>3</sup>Annals, 13. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Syme, op. cit., p. 551.

<sup>5</sup>R. M. Gunnere, Seneca the Philosopher and his Modern Message, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Seneca, De Clementia, Bk 2. 2.

"Good health proceeds from the head into all members of the body; they are all either brisk and erect or languid and drooping, according as their guiding spirit blooms or withers."<sup>6a</sup> While Seneca and Burrus guided the affairs of the state, the Roman people enjoyed good government and economic prosperity; when matters were taken over by the unprincipled despot-- a despot who lacked direction and feared and hated the capable men who might have helped him in his administration -- and his equally wanton coterie, Rome experienced some of her worst times.

One is at a loss though, to explain Seneca's chief purpose in writing his Ad Polybium de Consolatione if his claim of never being a "mere servile flatterer"<sup>7</sup> is to be regarded seriously, for while it is true that an ordinary man may be willing to pay any price to be relieved of an unbearable exile, the philosopher's claim is that banishment cannot affect virtue. There is such a marked difference between the Consolation addressed to his mother Helvia and that addressed to Polybius that Diderot questioned Seneca's authorship of the latter while Alexander suggests that it is a satirical piece that was above the heads of Claudius and his court.<sup>8</sup>

Important as his works undoubtedly are, Seneca the philosophical writer does not assume a place of much significance in the Annals of Tacitus.

---

<sup>6a</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Seneca's claim in Annals, 15. 61.

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Alexander, "Seneca's Ad Polybium de Consolatione: A Re-appraisal." Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Ser. III, Vol. XXXVII, Sec. II, pp. 35-56.

In fact, Tacitus describing the panegyric written by Seneca on the occasion of Claudius' funeral said, "Oratio a Seneca composita multum cultus praeferat, ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus accomodatum."<sup>9</sup> Commenting on the word "amoenum," Furneaux observes that, "As applied to such a man as Seneca, the term is, no doubt a veiled censure, and the following sentence implies that, when Tacitus wrote, the literary fame of Seneca was not sustained."<sup>10</sup> Thus, from Tacitus we hear nothing of Seneca's writings. Describing the liberal studies and limited literary interests of Caligula, Suetonius refers to his, that is Caligula's contempt for Seneca's style: ". . . he [Caligula] had such scorn of a polished and elegant style that he used to say that Seneca, who was very popular just then, composed 'mere school exercises,' and that he was 'sand without lime.'"<sup>11</sup>

Seneca is pointed out as a philosopher when he becomes the butt of Publius Suillius' vicious attack:

This man, familiar as he was only with profitless studies, and with the ignorance of boyhood, envied those who employed a lively and genuine eloquence in defence of their fellow citizens . . . . By what kind of wisdom or maxims of philosophy had Seneca within four years of royal favour amassed three hundred million sesterces?" At Rome the wills of the childless were, so to say, caught in his snare while Italy and the provinces were drained by a boundless usury.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Annals, 13. 3, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Furneaux, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 156, note on Ann 13. 3, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius, Gaius Caligula, LIII, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Annals, 13. 42.

In the charges of Suillius Rufus, reference is made to Seneca's considerable wealth and his investments in the provinces by way of usury; it was his tough policies as money lender, according to Cassius Dio,<sup>13</sup> that led to the revolt in Britain under the leadership of Boudicca. Tacitus seems to be biased towards Seneca; Dio is a hostile witness: "He [Dio] asserts that Seneca instigated Nero to murder his mother; that he conspired against Nero; that he insisted that the unwilling Pompeia Paullina should die with him. That being so, it is incautious, at the least, to accept Seneca's responsibility for the rebellion in Britain."<sup>13</sup>

Just as Tacitus gives evidence of his coolness towards Seneca's writings and style, so he shows his warm admiration for the philosopher in his dying moments. Having been accused of and condemned on a vague and questionable charge of treason, the very questionability of which charge has prompted various comments including Alexander's, "The enquête on Seneca's Treason,"<sup>14</sup> Seneca was forced to commit suicide by the very prince to whom only a few years before he addressed his dialogue on Clemency and whose reign he described "a pattern reign."<sup>15</sup> Here at last Tacitus depicts the man in all his greatness. Not only is he shown as accepting his fate with equanimity, but the Stoic character that was hidden and perhaps compromised in politics is brought to the forefront for the first time. We see him valuing courage, friendship and virtue:

---

<sup>13</sup>Syme, op. cit., p. 551 n.

<sup>14</sup>W. H. Alexander, "The enquête on Seneca's Treason": Classical Philology, XLVII, 1952, pp.1-6. Here, as usual, Alexander comes to the defence of Seneca.

<sup>15</sup>Seneca, De Clementia, Bk 2, 1.

. . . He turned to his friends, protesting that as he was forbidden to requite them, he bequeathed to them the only, but still the noblest possession yet remaining to him, the pattern of his life, which, if they remembered, they would win a name for moral worth and steadfast friendship. At the same time he called them back from their tears to manly resolution, now with friendly talk, and now with the sterner language of rebuke. "Where," he asked again and again, "are your maxims of philosophy, or the preparation of so many years' study against evils to come? Who knew not Nero's cruelty? After a mother's and a brother's murder, nothing remains but to add the destruction of a guardian and a tutor."<sup>16</sup>

Finally, after describing the noble attempt of the philosopher's wife, Paulina, to share her husband's fate and the tenderness and affection for his wife and then the philosopher's death, Tacitus says of the disposal of the corpse: "He was burnt without any of the usual funeral rites," and adds this epitaph -- perhaps his greatest tribute to Seneca the philosopher: "So he had directed in a codicil of his will, when even in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of his life's close."<sup>17</sup>

It is evident from Tacitus' treatment of Seneca that he was not much interested in Seneca as a philosopher. It is equally evident that he shields the philosopher from the full force of the charges made by Suillius and that "at no point does Tacitus inveigh against the moral worth of Seneca; he merely connects him with certain unpleasantness . . . ."<sup>18</sup>

"The least we may say is that when Seneca lives up to his philosophy he is praised by Tacitus."<sup>19</sup> This praise is best brought out in his description

---

<sup>16</sup> Annals, 15. 62

<sup>17</sup> Annals, 15. 64, 5-6. The underlining is my own.

<sup>18</sup> W. H. Alexander, "The Tacitean 'non liquet' on Seneca": University of Calif. Publ. in Classical Philology, 14. 8, p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> Armleder, op. cit., p. 92.

of the death scene and the beautiful epitaph: "Even in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of his life's close."<sup>20</sup>

Had Seneca been the leader or a member of some active opposition group, had he been a fanatical Stoic or Cynic, unable to adjust to the times, Tacitus' verdict might have been different. But Tacitus was aware of the difficult task before Seneca -- guardian, tutor, statesman and philosopher. One role had to suffer and Tacitus, being primarily a "Roman", was willing to put the 'public interest' -- the good of the City and indeed of the Empire -- ahead of the outraged virtue of Roman philosopher, even if it meant that our philosopher was forced to indulge Nero's lusts, condone his wrong actions and cover-up his murders by the publication of lying edicts.

---

<sup>20</sup>Cf. note 17 above.



## VI. Seneca the Man.

Tacitus may not have been very much interested in Seneca the philosopher, but there is little doubt that he was deeply interested in Seneca the courtier, statesman and patriot, for it is in his role as a public servant that he receives the most exposure from Tacitus. Since it is not the purpose of this study to condemn or defend Seneca or to justify the position taken by Tacitus with regard to Seneca and his public career, but merely to estimate Tacitus' verdict on 'Seneca the Man', we shall be spared the difficult and embarrassing task of taking sides on the matter.

As long as the portions of the Annals missing between the extant Books Six and Eleven continue to be lost, it will only be a matter of conjecture whether or not Tacitus dealt with Seneca in the courts of Gaius and Claudius and how he treated the charge of adultery brought against the courtier by Messalina.<sup>1</sup> When charges against Seneca are mentioned, serious charges indeed -- adultery, money, power and influence peddling -- "they are conceded -- or robbed of their full force by being lumped together with false allegations in the calumnies of a discredited advocate, Suillius Rufus, or retailed to Nero by anonymous detractors (among whom the alert reader would divine Ofonius Tigellinus)."<sup>2</sup>

To most of Seneca's critics,<sup>3</sup> it will appear that the philosopher-statesman compromised himself too often for his own good; Tacitus, on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dio, 60. 8, 4: Julia was charged with adultery "for which Annaeus Seneca was also exiled."

<sup>2</sup> Syme, op. cit., p. 551.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Dio who in 61.10 sets out to prove that Seneca's "conduct was seen to be diametrically opposed to the teachings of his philosophy."

other hand, gives no judgment. On the occasion of the murder of Britannicus, without mentioning any name, he alludes<sup>4</sup> to Seneca when he reports of Nero's largess to his friends: "Some there were who reproached men of austere professions with having on such occasions divided houses and estates among themselves, like so much spoil."<sup>5</sup>

Again Tacitus leaves the door wide open in the case of Nero's abortive attempt to murder Agrippina by shipwreck. He does not implicate Seneca in the scheme but suggests that the philosopher and his associate Burrus were "possibly already in the secret."<sup>6</sup>

Nero, meantime, as he waited for tidings of the consummation of the deed, received information that she Agrippina had escaped with the injury of a slight wound, after having so far encountered the peril that there could be no question as to its author. Then, paralyzed with terror and protesting that she would show herself the next moment eager for vengeance, either arming the slaves or stirring up the soldiery, or hastening to the Senate and the people, to charge him with the wreck, with her wound, and with the destruction of her friends, he asked what resource he had against all this, unless something could be at once devised by Burrus and Seneca. He had instantly summoned both of them, and possibly they were already in the secret. There was a long silence on their part; they feared they might remonstrate in vain, or believed the crisis to be such that Nero must perish, unless Agrippina were at once crushed. Thereupon Seneca was so far the more prompt as to glance back on Burrus, as if to ask him

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Furneaux, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, P. 175, note on *Annals*, 13. 81, 1: "The allusion is specially to Seneca . . . whose defence may be gathered from 14. 53, 6 and from passages in his own writings, such as 'nemo in id accipiendo obligatur quod illi repudiare non licuit.' (*de Ben.* 2. 18, 7)."

<sup>5</sup>*Annals*, 13. 18, 1.

<sup>6</sup>*Annals*, 14. 7, 3 "incertum an et ante gnaros," Dio suggests that Seneca incited Nero to matricide 62. 12, 1.

whether the bloody deed must be required of the soldiers. Burrus replied "that the praetorians were attached to the whole family of the Caesars, and remembering Germanicus would not dare a savage deed on his offspring. It was for Anicetus to accomplish his promise." Anicetus, without a pause; claimed for himself the consummation of the crime.

Again, when he says, "Post Seneca hactenus promptius, ut respiceret Burrum ac sciscitaretur, an militi imperanda caedes esset,"<sup>8</sup> Tacitus is not necessarily critical or commendatory. Probably Seneca, knowing the impossibility of having such a deed as the murder of Agrippina perpetrated by the praetorians, promptly suggested it to Burrus in order to forestall any attempt by Nero to embarrass the commander of the praetorians with some order that he would have to disobey.

Finally, concerning Agrippina's murder, Tacitus duly records the gist of Nero's letter to the Senate, points out the stupidity of the story that the shipwreck was a mere accident and adds, "So now it was not Nero, whose brutality was far beyond any remonstrance, but Seneca who was in ill repute, for having written a confession in such a style."<sup>9</sup> Much has been written on this sentence of Tacitus, especially by Alexander<sup>10</sup> who makes a reasoned and sometimes passionate defence for his much-maligned hero, Seneca. He shows how impossible it was for Seneca, a brilliant

---

<sup>7</sup>Annals, 14. 7, 1-5 (At Neroni nuntios . . . summam sceleris).

<sup>8</sup>Annals, 14. 7, 4-quoted in 7 above.

<sup>9</sup>Annals, 14. 11, 4.

<sup>10</sup>W. H. Alexander, "The communiqué to the Senate on Agrippina's death," Classical Philology Vol. XLIX (1954) pp. 94-97.

lawyer and orator to compose such a stupid and inadequate defence for Nero and goes on to suggest that Nero himself was the author of the letter. It is not our task to prove or disprove Seneca's authorship of such a letter. Tacitus does not suggest it; he ascribes to "rumour" the hostility that was directed towards Seneca for having lent his talents for such a scheme.<sup>11</sup>

Did Tacitus believe him to be guilty? From the evidence before us, it is safe to say only that Tacitus leaves the verdict to the discretion of his readers.

The charges levelled against Seneca by Suillius -- adultery, wealth, legacy hunting, influence peddling and usury -- were serious charges indeed and while, as noted earlier in this chapter, Tacitus "robs them of their full force,"<sup>12</sup> it may be useful for us to investigate some of these charges to ascertain Tacitus' verdict on 'Seneca the man.'

In considering these charges, it must be remembered that we are concerned here with Tacitus' view of the charges and his verdict on the man charged rather than the question of Seneca's guilt or innocence or the accuracy of the charges. Suillius<sup>13</sup> is reported to believe that Seneca was guilty. But who was Suillius? A discredited advocate,<sup>14</sup> an

---

<sup>11</sup>Cf. I. S. Ryberg, "Tacitus' Art of Innuendo," Transactions of the American Philological Association, LXXIII (1942), pp. 383-404. "The censure of Seneca for composing the letter is so placed as to emphasize, not Seneca's compliance, but the enormity of Nero's crime." p. 402.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. note 2 above.

<sup>13</sup>Annals, 13. 42.

<sup>14</sup>Annals, 11. 5, 2; 11. 6, 1, 5.

infamous delator,<sup>15</sup> "a man who had struggled with various calumnies and earned the hate of many."<sup>16</sup> It is clear from the very outset that Tacitus lets us see where his sympathies lie. Suillius, in earning "the hate of many" earned as well the hate of Tacitus who, no doubt, felt that such a man deserved the same punishment that was later meted out to Publius Celer Egnatius, the accuser of Barea Soranus. From Tacitus' own testimony we discover that the Senate revived the Cincian Law<sup>17</sup> "with the intent of crushing Suillius." Evidently, Seneca was involved in this, for it was Seneca he taunted, and charged with the above-mentioned crimes. Without saying it in so many words, Tacitus suggests that Seneca was a prime mover in the impeachment of Suillius:

Persons were not wanting to report all this to Seneca, in the exact words, or with a worse sense put on it. Accusers were also found who alleged that our allies had been plundered, when Suillius governed the province of Asia, and that there had been embezzlement of public monies. Then, as an entire year had been granted to them for inquiries, it seemed a shorter plan to begin with his crimes at Rome, the witnesses of which were on the spot. Three men charged Suillius with having driven Quintus Pomponius by a relentless prosecution into the extremity of civil war, with having forced Julia, Drusus's daughter, and Sabina Poppaea to suicide, with having treacherously ruined Valerius Asiaticus, Lusius Saturninus and Cornelius Lupus, in fact with the wholesale conviction of troops of Roman Knights, and with all the cruelty of Claudius.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Annals, 11. 1, 1; 2. 1; 4, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Annals, 13. 42, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Annals, 13. 42, 2. The Lex Cincia which was revived eleven years earlier, under the rule of Claudius, because of the same Suillius, was "an old enactment which forbade any one to receive a fee or a gift for pleading a cause." Annals, 11. 5, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Annals, 13. 43, 1-3.

P. Grimal<sup>19</sup> suggests that Seneca saw himself seriously threatened and thus had to use against Suillius the very weapons that Suillius had used against other men.

Il [Suillius] se répandait partout en propos si dangereux, que Sénèque se crut sérieusement menacé et qu'il eut recours, contre cet opposant, aux armes qui avaient autrefois servi contre lui-même. Il trouva des accusateurs pour reprocher à Suillius des prévarications (réelles ou supposées) commises au cours de son proconsulat d'Asie. Et comme le Sénat, pour gagner du temps, accordait un an pour établir les dossiers d'accusation et de défense, Sénèque changea sa tactique. Il fit accuser Suillius d'avoir servi la cruauté de Claude, et de provoquer, par ses délations, le supplice de bons citoyens. Cette fois le Sénat ne pouvait plus se dérober. Le procès fut jugé.<sup>20</sup>

Tacitus himself stated earlier, with regard to the philosopher's appointment as royal tutor to Domitius, that Seneca was believed to be devoted to Agrippina from the memory of her kindness and "infensus Claudio dolore iniuriae"<sup>21</sup> referring to the exile he suffered under Claudius. According to Furneaux,<sup>22</sup> the word "iniuriae" "implies that the charge of adultery with Julia on which he was banished was unfounded." Thus Tacitus' verdict on the charge of adultery is at least implied if not expressed outright.

The charges of wealth, legacy hunting, influence peddling and usury, although "robbed of their full force" are yet real for it is well-known that Seneca amassed a princely fortune while in the service of Nero.

---

<sup>19</sup>Pierre Grimal, Sénèque: Sa vie, son oeuvre, sa philosophie, pp. 27-29.

<sup>20</sup>Grimal, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>21</sup>Annals, 13. 8, 3.

<sup>22</sup>Furneaux, Annals Vol. II, p. 71, note on "iniuriae", 13. 8, 3.

To what extent though does Tacitus regard the charges as having ground? Most of them he leaves unanswered; and while Miss Walker would have us believe that Tacitus' judgment on Seneca "is implied in his judgment on Suillius:"<sup>23</sup> "Puniendos rerum atrocium ministros, ubi pretia scelerum adepti scelera ipsa aliis delegent,"<sup>24</sup> might it not be possible that Tacitus, instead of condemning Seneca was actually shielding him? Miss Ryberg<sup>25</sup> reminds us that Tacitus allows him to be attacked and criticized by Suillius, "one of the most detestable of the informers" and shows further, that as Suillius perishes soon after making these false charges, Tacitus would have us believe that he was punished for making false accusations against Seneca among others. No further mention is made about Seneca's supposed legacy hunting and as to the charge of usury, it is likely that Tacitus dismissed it as idle rumour or cared not to pursue the matter.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, one is made to wonder just what was Tacitus' motive in handling the whole question of 'Seneca the Man' the way he did. Much has been written about this but there seems to be no consensus of opinion on the subject. Miss Walker (rightly, I believe) suggests that in

---

<sup>23</sup>B. Walker, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>24</sup>Annals, 13. 43, 5.

<sup>25</sup>Inez Ryberg, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup>Helen Witmore in Seneca's Conception of the Stoic Sage, suggests that even though Seneca might have been involved in high finance his conscience was clear; there was no question of guilt (pp. 48,49).

Seneca's service to Nero, Tacitus saw a mirror of himself in Domitian's service.<sup>27</sup> Her conclusion, however, seems hardly in keeping with the facts. Her analysis, very shrewd and very Freudian, reveals Tacitus' account of Seneca as a masochistic confession in which the writer castigates himself (perhaps unconsciously) for his part in the government of Domitian and the various benefices enjoyed under that rule. She claims that Tacitus branded him as the "supreme Collaborator"<sup>28</sup> ("The man who does not come forward . . . to reap part of the profits of Tyranny, but does complaisantly abet the crimes of the Tyrant for his own comfort").<sup>29</sup> At the same time she regards the Agricola as a defense of his father-in-law's action in the face of Tyranny. Agricola, in her view though was not portrayed as a "Collaborator". Maybe Miss Walker is right in her analysis of Tacitus, but from this writer's limited knowledge, it is difficult to agree with her view. She sees Tacitus as sympathetic to others who served under a tyrant but very hostile to Seneca: "There is a personal resentment, because Seneca's life showed him what his own might appear when he claimed to honour Roman virtue while accepting favours from Domitian and abetting his crimes by silence."<sup>29a</sup>

If Tacitus saw in Seneca a mirror of himself in Domitian's service, then he was well aware that sometimes the end does justify the means.

---

<sup>27</sup> Walker, op. cit., p. 225.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>29a</sup> Ibid., p. 225.



Seneca himself admitted to receiving gifts from Nero but added that he had no choice but to accept: "Only one apology occurs to me, that it would not have been right for me to have thwarted your bounty."<sup>30</sup> Nowhere does Tacitus suggest that Seneca was morally corrupt and so, one is led to believe that he regards Seneca's acceptance of Nero's benefices and whatever part he had in the murders of Britannicus and Agrippina as justifiable -- yes, as justifiable crimes in the given circumstances, for as we shall see soon, Tacitus regarded the stability of Rome as threatened by the existence and activities of Britannicus and Agrippina. Thus his silence could well imply his approval of Seneca's course of action and his shielding of Seneca rather than his condemnation.

Tacitus did approve of the actions of Agricola as well as those of Seneca; his concern was for the welfare of Rome, and so, while he admired the courage of the Stoic, the admiration was tempered with criticism for the Stoic who gave his life "in nullum rei publicae usum."<sup>31</sup> Thus if Tacitus proved that "Agricola's policy was not only prudent, but the only one open to an honourable man,"<sup>32</sup> then he did just the same in the case of Seneca and his course of action. At this point some critics may object that Tacitus does not present a case against Agricola; he does not have to. The Agricola is an eulogy to a beloved father-in-law and while, like Seneca, Agricola served under a tyrant and served well, he never

---

<sup>30</sup> Annals, 14. 53, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Agricola, 42. 5; Cf. complete quote note 18 Chapter III.

<sup>32</sup> B. Walker, op. cit., p. 202.

occupied a post as sensitive as Seneca's and so did not face Seneca's problems and was not open to the criticisms that were Seneca's lot.

It is very easy to say that Seneca compromised himself and betrayed his Stoic beliefs in his reported complicity in the deaths of Britannicus and Agrippina; it is also easy to say that Tacitus regarded him guilty. While as a recorder of events Tacitus does not take sides on the matter as historian and artist he shrewdly suggests that Agrippina and Britannicus were a threat<sup>33</sup> and adds that Seneca and Burrus "believed the crisis to be such that Nero must perish, unless Agrippina were at once crushed."<sup>34</sup> Of course they were put to death without trial, but was not this a matter of expediency? Agricola, Tacitus and Seneca all served under cruel tyrants and to some extent they survived because they regarded themselves as being in the service of Rome and, indeed, in the service of the world. Thus stability in government, which depended a great deal on the life of the Emperor, was far more important than the blind adherence to certain creeds and abstract theories. It is likely that Tacitus was well acquainted with Seneca's recorded words and from the tenor of his work it may be assumed that he subscribed to the idea that:

The wise man will do that even whereof he doth not approve, that he may find the passage thereby into greater ends. Neither will he abandon his morality, nay but he will fit it into the necessities of the time. And that which others do employ upon their glory or their pleasure, he will use unto the public service.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Annals, 13. 14, 15; 13. 18, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Annals, 14. 7, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Seneca, ap. Lactantius, Inst. Div. III, 15 quoted by B. W. Henderson, The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero.

Tacitus' portrayal of Seneca is that of a dedicated public servant faced with the difficult task of holding the Empire together. The choice before him was either to resist the storm and perish or bend with the wind in the service of his country. Like Agricola and Tacitus, he chose the latter course of action for it seems that "to have bent before the storm was not considered a crime."<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps no assessment of Tacitus' verdict on 'Seneca the Man' would be complete without some reference to Tacitus' account of Seneca's death. The opportunity of destroying Seneca came to Nero when the philosopher's name was dragged into the Pisonian conspiracy. We discover that this opportunity was "a special joy to the Emperor, not because he had convicted him of the conspiracy but anxious to accomplish with the sword what poison had failed to do."<sup>37</sup> Thus we see Seneca as a marked victim of Nero and even more, we see that Tacitus accepts as a fact what he earlier attributed to "other writers" or "rumour" -- "tradidere quidam"<sup>38</sup> when he reported on Nero's attempt on Seneca's life.

In the face of doom, the doom that he sought to escape by retiring, Seneca displays the Stoic qualities that were hidden or maybe sacrificed during his service to Nero. Even though he was aware that Natalis was sent to him by Nero, he made his claim of independence to Natalis:

---

<sup>36</sup>Furieux and Anderson in the "Introduction" to Agricola, p. xxxii. Cf. Syme op. cit., p. 552: "Seneca's policy was the best possible . . . . Compromise is inherent in the nature of civil government.

<sup>37</sup>Annals, 15. 61, 3.

<sup>38</sup>Annals, 15. 45, 6.

He had no reason for preferring the interest of any private citizen to his own safety, and he had no natural aptitude for flattery. No one knew this better than Nero, who had oftener experienced Seneca's freespokenness than his servility.<sup>39</sup>

Seneca knew that he was facing his last moments yet his courage was such that the tribune was able to report to Nero that "he saw no signs of fear and perceived no sadness in his words or in his looks."<sup>40</sup> Indeed even when the sentence of death was announced to him we find him unmoved. "Ille interritus poscit testamenti tabulas,"<sup>41</sup> and when the tablets were denied him proceeded to bequeath to his friends "the noblest possession yet remaining to him." To the twentieth century cynic (as distinct from the first century cynic) his spoken testament may seem quite theatrical and to his critics extremely hypocritical, but there is no evidence to suggest that Tacitus regarded these words as anything but sincere.

. . . He bequeathed to them the only, but still the noblest possession yet remaining to him, the pattern of his life, which, if they remembered, they would win a name for moral worth and steadfast friendship. At the same time he called them back from their tears to manly resolution, now with friendly talk, and now with the sterner language of rebuke. "Where" he asked again and again, "are your maxims of philosophy, or the preparation of so many years' study against evils to come?"<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding his acceptance of benefices, notwithstanding his feeling that "Agrippina had to be crushed,"<sup>43</sup> Seneca was well aware of

---

<sup>39</sup>Annals, 15. 61.

<sup>40</sup>Annals, 15. 61, 5.

<sup>41</sup>Annals, 15. 62, 1.

<sup>42</sup>Annals, 15. 62, 1 + 2.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. note 34 above.

Nero's cruelty and his guilt of matricide and fratricide and saw himself as the next logical victim of Nero's cruelty. "Cui enim ignaram fuisse saevitiam Neronis? neque aliud superesse post matrem fratremque interfectos, quam ut educatoris praeceptorisque necem adiceret."<sup>44</sup>

Dio, in his hatred for Seneca, claims that the philosopher forced his wife to commit suicide with him;<sup>45</sup> Tacitus, on the other hand, paints a picture of tenderness and concern that gives the reader the impression that Seneca loved his wife deeply and that Tacitus admired Seneca for it. As they (Paulina and Seneca) severed their arms together, Tacitus reports, "Seneca, quoniam senile corpus et parco victu tenuatum lenta effugia sanguini praebebat."<sup>46</sup> So, in spite of his wealth, he still practised frugality! Perhaps this was Tacitus' answer to the charge of wealth hurled at Seneca by Suillius.

Even at the last moment his eloquence failed him not; he summoned his secretaries, and dictated much to them which, as it has been published for all readers in his own words, I forbear to paraphrase.<sup>47</sup>

While it is a pity that Tacitus did not paraphrase the last words which are now lost, it is indeed a lasting tribute to Seneca that Tacitus preferred to let his readers enjoy the philosopher's own words rather than a paraphrased version.

---

<sup>44</sup>Annals, 15. 62, 3.

<sup>45</sup>Dio XLII, 25.

<sup>46</sup>Annals, 15. 63, 5.

<sup>47</sup>Annals, 15. 63, 7.

As he died in much the same manner as did Socrates, of a "venenum" which Furneaux points out is the hemlock,<sup>48</sup> we are reminded of the later death of Thrasea in the presence of a mutual friend, Demetrius the Cynic. As his life ebbed away, Seneca said, "I offer this liquid as a libation to Jupiter the Deliverer,"<sup>49</sup> while Thrasea is reported to have said, "Libamus Iovi liberatori."<sup>50</sup>

The death scene of Seneca as described by Tacitus, brings to mind not only the death scene of Thrasea a Stoic but also the death scene of Petronius,<sup>51</sup> who although he had few qualities that Tacitus admired, yet in the face of a forced suicide, displayed such courage and constancy that he elicited Tacitus' praise. These three men, Petronius, Seneca, and Thrasea, committed suicide, not to escape life or duty, but because suicide was forced upon them and each one found comfort in his philosophy. Tacitus describes their deaths in detail and with great feeling, possibly because he admires their contempt for Nero, but more likely because they were constant and unwavering in the face of death.

As a close to his funeral eulogy, Tacitus adds:

There was a rumour that Sabrius Flavius had held a secret consultation with the centurions, and had planned, not without Seneca's knowledge

---

<sup>48</sup>Furneaux, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 402, note on "venenum" (Annals, 15. 64, 3).

<sup>49</sup>Postremo stagnum calidum aquae introit, respergens proximos servorum addita voce, libare se liquorem illum Iovi liberatori," 15. 64, 4

<sup>50</sup>Annals, 16. 35, 2.

<sup>51</sup>Annals, 16. 19. Cf. notes 22 and 23 of Chapter IV "The Professional and Non-Professional Philosophers" Part (a).

that when Nero had been slain by Piso's instrumentality, Piso also was to be murdered, and the Empire handed over to Seneca, as a man singled out for his splendid virtues by all persons of integrity.<sup>52</sup>

Did Tacitus believe Seneca to be in any way connected with this plot?

We do not know. One thing though is clear: Tacitus has given in this paragraph his unmistakable verdict on "Seneca the Man", for in expressing the sentiments of others regarding Seneca, he leaves us with a phrase that is a fitting epitaph for Seneca's tombstone; a phrase that Tacitus would no doubt have envied for his own tombstone: "Seneca . . . a man singled out for his splendid virtues by all persons of integrity."

---

52

Annals, 15. 65.

## Conclusion

In the preceding chapters we have sought to shed light on Tacitus' treatment of the philosophers and to some extent his views on philosophy. The question that comes to mind is, "Does Tacitus fulfil his promise of impartiality--sine ira et studio?"<sup>1</sup> There is no question that in his recognition of courage and virtue, Tacitus the aristocrat is impartial, even if this impartiality is for the purpose of underlining his claim that the nobility had plunged into such servility and cowardice that a slave, a commoner or a freed-woman displayed more courage and virtue than many an aristocrat--witness his report of the courage of Epicharis and the Ligurian woman.<sup>2</sup>

We discovered in Chapter III that Tacitus is a mild Stoic with eclectic tendencies and that he does display a certain amount of bias in his treatment of the philosophers. His concern was for the stability of the Empire which he knew depended on the life of the Emperor and the obedience of the citizens. Thus his hostility was directed against certain philosophers who gave their lives "in nullum rei publicae usum."<sup>3</sup> These included members of the 'Stoic Opposition' whom as moral individuals Tacitus may have admired but whose intransigence and theorizing that, in Tacitus' eyes, brought no benefit to the Empire, he detested.

We see then, not Tacitus' 'Verdict on the Philosophers' as a whole, but his verdict on individual philosophers and classes of philosophers.

---

<sup>1</sup>Annals, 1. 1, 6.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. notes 14 and 15 of Chapter III and the sentiments expressed in this connection.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. note 18, Chapter III and the quotation of Agricola, 42. 5.



In Chapter IV, for example, Thrasea Paetus is seen to receive censure for his intransigence and praise when he serves Rome as a Roman. It is for the same reason, his service to Rome, that Seneca fairs well at the hands of Tacitus; thus in Chapter V of this study, we discovered that "Seneca the philosophical writer does not assume a place of significance in the Annals of Tacitus."<sup>4</sup> However, in Chapter VI, we see Seneca the philosopher-statesman, a dedicated servant of Rome, receiving Tacitus' praise and being shielded by the historian in the face of a most vicious attack by Suillius Rufus. In his portrayal of the base philosophers who paraded themselves before Nero and his court,<sup>5</sup> Tacitus shows his dislike, not for philosophers, but for charlatans and intellectual prostitutes.

In Chapter IV of this study, "The Professional and Non-Professional Philosophers," we discovered in Tacitus' verdict on Musonius and on Demetrius a dichotomy. In the case of Musonius, the philosopher is ridiculed for his "intempestiva sapientia" when he tried to preach peace to the blood-thirsty armies ready for civil war<sup>6</sup> and praised for leading the impeachment and obtaining the condemnation of Publius Celer, himself a philosopher. This Publius Celer, infamous for his role as delator, receives only Tacitus' contempt.<sup>7</sup> For coming to Publius' defence in a court of law, Demetrius

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Chapter V, note 9.

<sup>5</sup>Noted in Chapter IV, Part (a), Note 24, Annals, 14. 16, 3.

<sup>6</sup>The entire incident is discussed in Chapter IV, Part (b), Notes 27-30.

<sup>7</sup>Annals, 16. 32, Cf. Chapter IV, Part (b).

who was earlier admired as the friend of Seneca and Thrasea received Tacitus' criticism.<sup>8</sup>

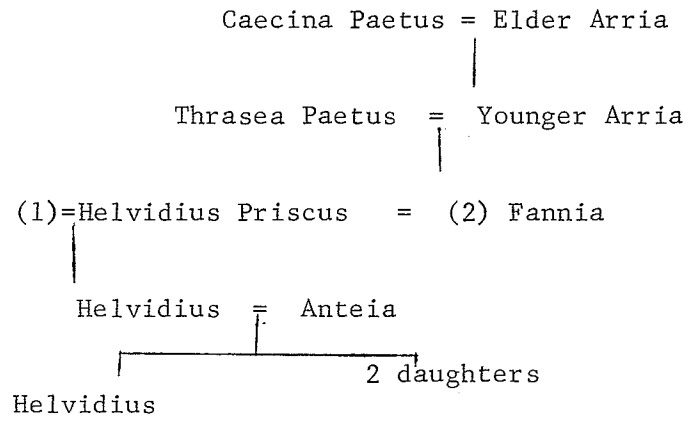
Tacitus' hatred of tyranny and tyrants led him to condemn every delator and any one who came to the delator's defence. At the same time his concern for the stability of Rome and the Roman Empire directed his hatred against those philosophers who, however upright, opposed, at least as far as Tacitus was concerned, for the sake of opposing and acted "in nullum rei publicum usum." In each judgment delivered by Tacitus, there seems to be, as an underlying principle, the words of Eprius Marcellus, no friend of Tacitus, for it was Eprius who informed against Thrasea Paetus: ". . . bonos imperatores voto expetere, quaecumque tolerare."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Histories, IV, 40, Cf. Chapter IV, Part (b), Note 31.

<sup>9</sup>Histories, IV, 8, 3.

Appendix A -- The Paetus Family<sup>1</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> After Betty Radice in "Introduction" to The Letters of the Younger Pliny, p. 22.

## Bibliography

### (a) Ancient Sources

- Dio Cassius, Dio's Roman History with an English translation by Earnest Cory; Loeb Classical Library. London: Heinemann, 1961.
- Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, Bks 1, III, V. Edited by J. D. Duff, Cambridge: University Press, 1923.
- Lucretius, The Nature of the Universe, translated by R. E. Latham. London: Penguin Books, 1961.
- Petronius, The Satyricon, translated by William Arrowsmith. New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1959.
- Pliny, The Younger, The Letters of the Younger Pliny, translated by Betty Radice. London: Penguin Books, 1963.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: Minor Dialogues together with the Dialogue on Clemency, translated by H. Stewart. London: George Bell and Sons, 1889.
- Suetonius: Suetonius, translated by J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, 2 volumes, 1964.
- Tacitus, The Complete Works of Tacitus, translated by J. Church and W. J. Brodribb, edited with an Introduction by Moses Hadas. New York: The Modern Library, 1942.
- Tacitus, The Annals, edited by H. Furneaux. Vol. I: Books I-VI, Second Edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, 691 pp.
- Vol. II: Books XI-XVI, Second Edition, revised by H. F. Pelham and C. D. Fisher. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, 519 pp.
- Tacitus, Cornelius, The Histories, edited by C. Halm in P. Cornelii Taciti: Libri Que Supersunt, Leipzig and Berlin; B. G. Teubneri, 1923.

Tacitus, Cornelius, Agricola, edited by H. Furneaux and J. G. C. Anderson.  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.

(b) Histories of Philosophy

Arnold, E. V., Roman Stoicism, Cambridge: University Press, 1911.

Capes, W. W. Stoicism, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge,  
1880.

Copleston, Fredrick, A History of Philosophy: Volume I Greece and Rome.  
New York: Doubleday, 1962.

Dudley, Donald R., A History of Cynicism - From Diogenes to the 6th Cen-  
tury A.D. London: Methuen, 1937.

Hicks, R. D., Stoic and Epicurean, New York: Longmans, 1910.

Jones, W. J., A History of Western Philosophy, New York: Harcourt, Brace  
1952.

Murray, Gilbert, The Stoic Philosophy, London and New York: G. P. Putnam  
and Sons, 1915.

(c) Other Works

Bagnani, Gilbert, Arbiter of Elegance: A Study of the Life and Works of  
C. Petronius, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954.

Charlesworth, M. P., Five Men, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press,  
1936.

Curtis, Michael, (ed.) The Great Political Theories I - From Plato and  
Aristotle to Locke and Montesquien. New York: Avon Books, 1961.

Dill, Samuel, Roman Society: From Nero to Marcus Aurelius, New York:  
Meridian Library, 1956.

- Duff, J. Wight, A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age, London: Ernest Benn, 1964, 599 pp.
- Geytenbeck, A. C. Van, Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe, translated by B. L. Hijmans Jr. Assen: Vangorium, 1963.
- Grimal, Pierre, Senecae: Sa vie, Son oeuvre, Sa philosophie, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948, 152 pp.
- Gunmere, R. M., Seneca the Philosopher and his Modern Message, Boston: Marshall Jones, 1922, 150 pp.
- Hadas, Moses, (ed.) The Essential Works of Stoicism. New York: Bantam Books, 1961.
- Henderson, B. W., The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero. London: Methuen, 1903.
- Starr, Chester G., Civilization and the Caesars: The Intellectual Revolution in the Roman Empire. New York: W. W. Norton, 1965, 413 pp.
- Syme, Ronald, Tacitus. Oxford: University Press, 1958.
- Walker, B., The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History. Manchester: University Press, 1952.
- Witmore, Helen, Seneca's Conception of the Stoic Sage as Shown in His Prose Works. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1936.
- Wirszubski, Ch., Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome During the Late Republic and Early Principate. Cambridge: University Press, 1950.
- (d) Articles and Other Publications.
- W. H. Alexander, "The Tacitean 'non liquet' on Seneca" University of California Publications in Classical Philology, XIV. 8 Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952, pp. 269-386.

- W. H. Alexander, "The enquete on Seneca's Treason Ann XV. 60, 4-5,"  
Classical Philology, XLVII (1952), pp. 1-6.
- W. H. Alexander, "Seneca the Philosopher in account with Roman history,"  
Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Sect. II, Ser. III  
(1947), XLI, pp. 20-46.
- W. H. Alexander, "The communique to the Senate on Agrippina's death,"  
Classical Philology, XLIX (1954), pp. 94-97.
- Paul John Armleder, "Tacitus Attitude to Philosophy," Classical Bulletin,  
XXXVIII (1962), pp. 89-91.
- Paul John Armleder, "Tacitus and Professional Philosophers," Classical  
Bulletin, XXXVII (1961), pp. 90-93.
- M. P. Charlesworth, "Providentia and Aeternitas," Harvard Theological  
Review, XXIX (1936), pp. 107-132.
- M. P. Charlesworth, "The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the  
Creation of Belief," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXIII  
(1937), pp. 105-133.
- T. A. Dorrey, "Agricola and Domitian," Greece and Rome, Second Series,  
Vol. VII, 1960 (Continuous Series, Volume XXIX) pp. 60-71.
- Robert Eisler, "Cynicism," in The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences,  
Vol. 4. New York: MacMillan, 1931.
- D. McAlindon, "Claudius and the Senators," American Journal of Philology,  
Vol. LXXVIII (1957), pp. 279-286.
- D. McAlindon, "Senatorial Opposition to Claudius and Nero," American  
Journal of Philology, Vol. LXXVII (1956), pp. 113-132.
- Cora E. Lutz, "Musonius Rufus: 'The Roman Socrates'," Yale Classical  
Studies, Vol. X (1957), pp. 3-147.

Stewart Irwin Oost, "The Career of M. Antonius Pallas," American Journal of Philology, Vol. LXXIX (1958), pp. 113-139.

R. S. Rogers, "The Tacitean Pattern in Treason Trials," Transactions of the American Philological Association, Vol. 83 (1952), pp. 279-311.

Inez Ryberg, "Tacitus' Art of Innuendo" Transactions of the American Philological Association, Vol. LXXIII (1942), pp. 383-404.

J. M. C. Toynbee, "Dictators and Philosophers in the First Century A.D." Greece and Rome, Vol. 13 (1944), pp. 43-

H. E. Wedeck, "The question of Seneca's Wealth," Latomus XIV (1955) pp. 540-544.