

## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

### A PROVERBIAL EXPRESSION IN TACITUS

genitus Vulsiniis patre Seio Strabone equite Romano, et prima iuventa C. Caesarem, divi Augusti nepotem, sectatus, non sine rumore Apicio diviti et prodigo stuprum veno dedisse, mox Tiberium variis artibus devinxit, adeo ut obscurum adversum alios sibi uni incautum intectumque efficeret, non tam *sollertia* (*quippe isdem artibus victus est*) quam deum ira in rem Romanam, cuius pari exitio vixit ceciditque [*Annales* 4. 1. 2].

Scholars to date have failed to reach any agreement on the meaning of the words in italics; the most recent discussion is by D. Wiesen in *Mnemosyne*, XXIII (1970), 402–407, to which the reader is directed for full references. Two basic interpretations (with minor variations) have held the field: (1) “. . . not so much through *sollertia* (for he was *vanquished by means of* these same devices) as through the *deum ira* . . .”; and (2) “. . . not so much through *sollertia* (for he was *surpassed in respect of* these same devices) as through the *deum ira* . . .”

Wiesen comes out in support of the second interpretation; I shall argue that Latin idiom demands that we prefer the first interpretation. It seems to have gone unobserved that in the words “*quippe isdem artibus victus est*” Tacitus employs a variation on a set of well-attested proverbial phrases, which are characterized by the presence of the ablative *arte* or *artibus*. The general sense may be expressed in English by the (obsolete) proverb, “He was hoist with his own petard.” Tacitus is simply saying that Sejanus’ own (acknowledged) weapon, *sollertia*, was ultimately the cause of his undoing (when wielded by Tiberius).

1. As does Wiesen, in my view. There is no need to discuss here in detail his various arguments designed to demonstrate that the interpretation rejected by him would involve “an almost meaningless statement” (i.e., the very statement which the majority of interpreters have always accepted without hesitation), since my thesis is that his alternate interpretation fails to meet the first requirement of any interpretation: agreement with Latin idiom. I may say that his paper, despite its systematic presentation, in more than one place seems to me overly subtle. Let me therefore acknowledge publicly my debt to Dr. Wiesen’s paper for the genesis of this one.

Hence *sollertia* alone can be only a partial explanation of Sejanus’ success [note *non tam . . . quam* rather than, e.g., *non . . . sed*] and a deeper reason must be sought—in the *deum ira*. This is vintage Tacitean irony contrived for rhetorical effect and it is a mistake to examine too closely the logical implications of the statement.<sup>1</sup> The language is, to borrow a phrase from Wilamowitz, “nicht streng logisch, aber verständlich und wirksam.”<sup>2</sup>

To come to the documentation. This general cast of thought can be seen already among the Greeks:

- (1) ὥδ’ ἐστὶ μύθων τῶν Λιβυτικῶν κλέος,  
πληγέντ’ ἀτράκτω τοξικῶ τὸν αἰετὸν  
εἰπεῖν ἰδόντα μηχανὴν πτερώματος·  
“τάδ’ οὐχ ὑπ’ ἄλλων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς αὐτῶν πτεροῖς  
ἀλίσκόμεσθα”

[Aeschylus *Frag.* 139 Nauck<sup>2</sup> = 231 Mette].

- (2) αὐτὸς κατ’ αὐτοῦ τὰρα μηχανορραφῶ

[Aeschylus *Choephoroe* 221].

- (3) ἐν τοῖς ἐμμαντοῦ δικτύοις ἀλώσσομαι

[*Frag. com. adesp.* 560 Kock].<sup>3</sup>

Similarly in Latin, a good example (*unum e multis*) is provided by Terence *Adelphoe* 958: “suo sibi gladio hunc iugulo.” Such instances of course only parallel the thought; what we desiderate to prove our case are specific examples of *ars* / *artes* occurring in similar proverbial expressions. The evidence for this is so abundant as to be quite striking:

- (1) capti deinde eadem arte sunt, qua ceperant  
Fabios [Livy 2. 51. 5].

2. *Ad Ar. Lys.* 1235.

3. A similar, but distinct, proverb may be seen in *Frag. com. adesp.* 47 Demiańczuk, ἀγὼς τρόπον μάχαιραν ἐσκάλευσά <μοι> = “I was the cause of my own undoing” (compare the testimonia *ad loc.*). In a lighter vein compare the comic poet Antiphanes, *Frag.* 300. 1 Kock, οἶνω τὸν οἶνον ἐξελαύνειν = “to take a hair of the dog that bit you.” (See the whole fragment, preserved by Athenaeus 2. 44A, which goes on to give a series of examples illustrating τὸ ὁμοίῳ τὸ ὁμοιον ἐξελαύνειν; cf. also *Frag. com. adesp.* 453 and 494 Kock.)

- (2) *ibi non bello aperto sed suis artibus, fraude et insidiis, est prope circumventus*  
[Livy 21. 34. 1].
- (3) *nec Hannibalem fefellit suis se artibus peti*  
[Livy 22. 16. 5].
- (4) *... quibus artibus ad id locorum nostri et duces et exercitus capti forent, iis adversus inventorem usurum* [Livy 25. 19. 11].
- (5) *Iugurtha ubi... se suis artibus temptari animadvortit...* [Sallust *Iugurtha* 48. 1].
- (6) *ipse miser docui, quo posset ludere pacto custodes: heu heu nunc premor arte mea*  
[Tibullus 1. 6. 9–10].
- (7) *... neque enim lex aequior ullast quam necis artifices arte perire sua*  
[Ovid *Ars amat.* 1. 655–56].
- (8) *utque dedit iustas tauri fabricator aeni, sic ego do poenas artibus ipse meis*  
[Ovid *Tristia* 5. 12(13). 48].
- (9) *nec quemquam nostri nisi me laesere libelli, artificis periit cum caput arte sua*  
[Ovid *Ibis* 5–6].
- (10) *... callidissime hostem nunc precibus nunc minis, iam simulata iam vera fuga eludentem artibus suis adgressus est* [Florus 1. 36. 10].<sup>4</sup>

These parallels demonstrate conclusively

that *isdem artibus* in Tacitus is part of a proverbial expression.<sup>5</sup> They also permit us to determine the meaning of *victus est* here. Wiesen proposes to take “*vinco* in the sense, ‘excel in intellectual or moral qualities.’”<sup>6</sup> This cannot be correct. Most of the phrases listed above occur in military contexts; they all contain verbs indicative of action, hostility, destruction (*capere, circumvenire, petere, temptare, premere, adgredi, perire*). It is only with such contexts as background that the meaning of *victus est* may be first appreciated: it is a specifically military metaphor. To take *victus est* in a transferred, exclusively “intellectual” sense is too tame and does not agree with Latin idiom, as demonstrated above.<sup>7</sup> We must rather restore to the words *isdem artibus victus est* their more vigorous, truly Latin meaning, and allow old Sejanus once again to be “hoist with his own petard.”<sup>8</sup>

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4. Compare also the following passages: (1) “... suamet ipsae fraude omnes interierunt” (Livy 8. 18. 9); and (2) “ita inde Hannibal suamet ipse fraude captus abiit” (Livy 27. 28. 13).

A few of the examples which I cite are listed by A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890), p. 38. See also E. Skard, *Sallust und seine Vorgänger* (= *Symb. Osl. Suppl.* XV [Oslo, 1956]), pp. 36–37. Neither cites nor discusses the crucial Tacitus passage. My student, Mr. J. Michael Clarke, M.A., put me on the track of the Ovid passages.

5. The presence of such locutions in Sallust (Tacitus’ immediate source for much of his diction) may be significant. In the sentence directly following the one which we are examining, Tacitus goes on to describe Sejanus in language clearly modeled on Sallust’s description of Catiline (*Cat.* 5), as has long been recognized. In that very passage of Sallust one may read “... inopia rei familiaris et conscientia scelerum, quae utraque iis artibus auxerat, quas supra memoravi...” It cannot be excluded that the occurrence of *artes* in this passage influenced, consciously or unconsciously, Tacitus’ choice of *artes* in our passage.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 403.

7. There is a further objection: Wiesen’s interpretation requires *isdem artibus* to be an ablative of specification [*vincere* (= “excel”) *aliquem aliquam re*], whereas both the preceding *sollertia* and the following *ira* are clearly ablatives of means or cause (a Roman would not have made this later,

somewhat artificial distinction). To my fallible ear, at least, this shift of category is an awkward interruption of the natural flow of the words and ought not to be defended as “Tacitean inconcinnity.” The point should probably not be pressed too much, since a Roman would not have distinguished much more rigidly between (a) ablative of “specification” and (b) ablative of “cause or means” than between (a) ablative of “cause” and (b) ablative of “means.” Indeed, in the Latin words *isdem artibus victus est*, the distinction between the two proposed interpretations is, both semantically and syntactically, much slighter than the various renderings into modern languages falsely suggest. Consider Ov. *Met.* 5. 309–11: “... nobiscum... certate deae, nec voce nec arte / vincemur...” Is *arte* ablative of means or of specification? Does *vincemur* mean “be conquered” or “be surpassed”? Answer to each question: Both! (Note *certate* in the words of Ovid just cited; it helps to determine the force of *vincemur*.) The real objection, therefore, to Wiesen’s interpretation is that, of the two possible—and not contradictory—connotations of Tacitus’ words, he specifically excludes that one which would have been more prominent to the Roman reader, as I hope that I have shown. Nevertheless, it ought to be observed that in not one of the parallel passages which I adduce above can the ablatives *arte* / *artibus* be naturally explained as specification rather than means.

8. I should like to thank the anonymous reader at *CP* for his comments, which were both instructive and extremely learned.