

THREE CONJECTURES IN TACITUS' *AGRICOLA*

(1) *Agr.* 6. 4. The MSS give *idem praeturae certior et silentium*. Usually this corrupt passage is restored according to the conjecture of Rhenanus as *idem praeturae tenor et silentium*,¹ because *certior et* does not make sense, although it has been pointed out several times that even this, the best of various suggestions as to how to solve the problem, is basically not satisfactory.²

Rhenanus' conjecture has three weaknesses:

- (1) *tenor* does not have the meaning which is given to the word in this passage;³
- (2) the juncture *tenor praeturae/tenor quaesturae* does not occur anywhere else;⁴
- (3) *tenor* is connected by *et* to another abstract in only one passage in Latin literature.⁵

The emendation is, however, plausible in so far as the letters *t* and *c* are often confused in the manuscripts.⁶ We have to demand of a plausible conjecture that it takes into consideration the context as far as syntax and style and content are concerned. But when we look more closely we notice that *Agricola* here appears throughout as the subject:

auctus est ibi filia, in subsidium simul ac solacium: nam filium ante sublatum brevi amisit. mox inter quaesturam ac tribunatum plebis atque ipsum etiam tribunatus annum quiete et otio transiit, gnarus sub Nerone temporum, quibus inertia pro sapientia fuit. idem praeturae † certior et† silentium; nec enim iurisdictio obvenerat. ludos et inania honoris medio rationis atque abundantiae duxit, uti longe a luxuria ita famae propior.

If, however, one tries to correct the corrupt passage by means of one of the conjectures which have been suggested (e.g. *tenor*, *torpor*, *otium*, *gestio*, *et ius*, *rektor*, *honor*, *sortitione*), one will bring about a syntactical discrepancy. Thus it becomes clear that the corrupt *certior et* cannot conceal a noun, but rather a verb, for otherwise it is impossible to establish the syntactical context. That again requires that *silentium* should be taken as object. If one can agree with the above-mentioned considerations, and bearing in mind that after all *scriptio continua* is a characteristic feature of the *Hersfeldensis*, one will easily be able to realize that the missing verb is very likely to be a form of *tenere*, for *tenere silentium* is common in Latin,⁷ and besides, it fits very

¹ The evidence is set out in Ogilvie–Richmond, *A Commentary on Tacitus, Agricola* (Oxford, 1967), and in other editions.

² See R. Verdière, 'Notes de lecture', *Latomus* 19 (1960), 729; K. Wellesley, *JRS* 59 (1969), 266; É. Borzsák, *Latomus* 38 (1979), 165.

³ Strictly speaking, it would be senseless to translate *praeturae tenor* as 'the course of the praetorship', for that is normally only *praetura*.

⁴ The editors of the Thesaurus informed me in a letter (25 September 1979): *praeturae tenor* or *quaesturae tenor* could not be found, apart from Tac. *Agr.* 6. 4. The closest parallel is Val. Max. 9. 11 ext. 4 *privati ac publici officii tenor*. Some passages of Livy could be interesting in this connection, especially 4. 10. 9 *quinque consulatus eodem tenore gesti* and 7. 40. 9 *eodem tenore duo insequentes consulatus gessi*. These passages of Livy, however, prove clearly that *tenor* means 'uninterrupted course'.

⁵ Sen. *QNat.* 7. 25. 6 *tenor et aequalitas*.

⁶ cf. the problems at *Agr.* 34. 3 and *Germ.* 46. 1.

⁷ The editors of the Thesaurus were kind enough to provide me with these passages: Ov. *Met.* 1. 206 *tenuere silentia cuncti*; Liv. 1. 28. 8 *Albana pubes... silentium tenet*; Val. Fl. 2. 584 *medii tenuere silentia ponti*; Stat. *Theb.* 6. 467 ff. *solus Echionides... silentia... maesta tenet*. It does not change anything in our argument that *silentium* in Tac. *Agr.* 6. 4 is a synonym of *quies et otium*, which is evident from the context (cf. Gerber et Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum*, s.v.). For we are not dealing here with a special meaning of *silentium*, but with a lexical variant of the general meaning of *silentium* which is dictated by the context.

well into the context as far as syntax is concerned as well as content. So *idem praeturae* (sc. *Agricola*) *tenuit silentium* or, simpler and more understandable, *idem praetor tenuit silentium*.

(2) *Agr.* 9. 3:

iam vero tempora curarum remissionumque divisa: ubi conventus ac iudicia poscerent, gravis (sc. *Agricola*) intentus, severus et saepius misericors: ubi officio satis factum, nulla ultra potestatis persona; tristitiam et adrogantiam et avaritiam exuerat. nec illi, quod est rarissimum, aut facilitas auctoritatem aut severitas amorem deminuit.

All MSS give *divisa*, which I consider corrupt and would like to replace by *diversa*, because Tacitus does not talk about the division of time itself, but about the division of time into two and the discrepancy in *Agricola*'s behaviour. This interpretation is substantiated very well by the context, although there is no denying the fact that even this *diversitas morum* of *Agricola* troubles the commentators quite often, with the result that they want to exclude as spurious the words *tristitiam et adrogantiam et avaritiam exuerat*. This thought simply belongs to the *topoi* of ancient literature, for 'die Verbindung gegensätzlicher, fast als unvereinbar erscheinender Vorzüge ist in der ganzen Antike und auch gerade in der Biographie etwas, was besonders gerühmt wird' (Lausberg).⁸

There is a striking parallel in *Ann.* 6. 51. 3:

morum quoque tempora illi (sc. Tiberio) diversa: egregium vita famaue, quoad privatus vel in imperiis sub Augusto fuit; occultum ac subdolum fingendis virtutibus, donec Germanicus ac Drusus superfuere; idem inter bona malaue mixtus incolumi matre.

Finally one should add that *diversus/divisus* have also been corrupted in other passages in the minor works of Tacitus (cf. *Germ.* 28.1).

(3) *Agr.* 44. 2:

quod si habitum quoque eius posteri noscere velint, decentior quam sublimior fuit; nihil impetus (eA: metus E^{2m} e^m A^m) in vultu: gratia oris supererat.

The problem in this passage lies not only in the choice between *impetus* and *metus*, but in the interpretation of the passage as a whole. For how can one actually explain *nihil impetus in vultu*?⁹ None of the attempted explanations is convincing and every attempt to interpret it fails because according to the Thesaurus there is no similar usage of *impetus*.¹⁰

To consider the context first. We can translate the expression *gratia oris supererat*¹¹ as 'the amiability of his face dominated'. From a syntactical point of view the disputed sentence is asyndetic, that is either it establishes a parallel or a contrast to *gratia oris supererat* and thus we are dealing either with an *asyndeton enumerativum* or an

⁸ See Ogilvie-Richmond, ad loc. Consider also the notes by M. Lausberg, *Gymnasium* 87 (1980), 420 f. about the description of the *diversitas morum* in ancient biographies. Note also Tac. *Germ.* 15. 1.

⁹ The usual interpretation (e.g. of Ogilvie and Richmond) is 'nothing violent in his face, kindness of expression abounded'; or (R. Till) 'in his features was no passion, but kindness predominated'; (H. W. Benario) 'there was a good deal of facial charm'. But interpreting it in this way one misses the fact that the biography was meant to express something positive but in a contradictory way.

¹⁰ The passage Sall. *Iug.* 34. 1 . . . *multitudo – vehementer adensa terrebat eum clamore, voltu, saepe impetu atque aliis omnibus, quae ira fieri amat, vicit tamen inprudencia* is only an accidental lexical parallel.

¹¹ cf. Suet. *Tit.* 3. 1 *cui* (sc. *formae Titi*) *non minus auctoritatis inesset quam gloriae*; Claud. 18. 76 *defloruit oris gratia*.

asyndeton adversativum. Now *vultus* and *os* are virtually synonymous.¹² Moreover the combinations of letters *inb-*, *imm-*, *inp-* are often confused in the manuscripts. Therefore I would like to propose the following conjecture: *nihil inmotum in vultu: gratia oris supererat*.

To support this somewhat unusual use of *inmotus* I refer to *Ann.* 2. 29. 2 in the first place: *manus ac supplices voces ad Tiberium tendens immoto eius vultu excipitur*;¹³ *Paneg.* 6. 5 *vultus immobiles et serios exigendos*; cf. also Ovid, *Met.* 3. 1. 48 *adstupet ipse sibi vultuque inmotus eodem*; Tac. *Ann.* 16. 10. 4 *donec princeps immobilem se precibus et invidiae iuxta ostendit*.

But why should Tacitus have talked of the unmoved, iron face of Agricola? Obviously because we hear of it elsewhere in the *Agricola*. We read, for example, in 9. 3:

Ubi conventus ac iudicia poscerent, gravis intentus severus et saepius misericors: ubi officio satis factum, nulla ultra potestatis persona; tristitiam et adrogantiam et avaritiam exuerat. nec illi, quod est rarissimum, aut facilitas (= gratia oris) auctoritatem aut severitas (= nihil inmotum in vultu) amorem deminuit.

We have to understand that in the opinion of ancient people a human being's inner self was revealed in his outward appearance. For it was a common view in classical antiquity that the face (and especially the eyes) betrayed a person's thoughts.¹⁴ But the severe and iron appearance of Agricola was just a mask, which he always wore as an officer. It belonged neither to his real character nor to his true nature.

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¹² cf. H. Menge, *Lateinische Synonymik* (Heidelberg, 1959), p. 149; K. Jax, *Studi in onore di U. E. Paoli* (1955), pp. 423–32.

¹³ See E. Koestermann, ad loc.

¹⁴ cf. Cic. *De Leg.* 1. 27; *In Pis.* 1. 1; *De Oratore* 2. 148, 3. 218, 3. 221.