

DVBITATIO COMPARATIVA: A MISUNDERSTOOD
IDIOM IN PLINY (*NATURAL HISTORY* 7.150),
TACITUS (*HISTORIES* 4.6) AND OTHERS

in summa deus ille caelumque nescio adeptus magis an meritis herede hostis sui filio
excessit. (Pliny, *Natural History* 7.150)

ea ultio, incertum maior an iustior, senatum in studia diduxerat. (Tacitus, *Histories* 4.6.1)
maior *ms.* : inanior Wellesley

It is not uncommon for the elder Pliny and Tacitus to be charged with obscurity. These two phrases, however, have caused particular difficulties, resulting from widespread misunderstanding of the idiom involved in both. Though it occurs widely in Latin, it is absent from the standard English-language grammars and from Kühner–Stegmann.¹ This article seeks to resolve doubts over Tacitus and others, and to correct a universal misprision of Pliny's take on Augustan apotheosis, by demonstrating that Latin has yet another way of expressing 'both ... and', in a rhetorical figure which we may call *dubitatio comparativa*.

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To begin with Tacitus. His truncated narrative of Vespasian's principate opens with the senate's abortive attempts at reasserting independence, featuring protagonists Helvidius Priscus and Epirus Marcellus. By way of preparation, *Histories* 4.5–6 presents a character sketch of Helvidius and recalls a debate eighteen months previous in which Helvidius had accused Epirus of *delatio* against Thrasea Paeus. *ea ultio, incertum maior an iustior, senatum in studia diduxerat*. In a reading of Helvidius, and more broadly of Tacitus' view of the 'Stoic opposition', a good deal depends on establishing whether or not the text here is corrupt, and what it means.

The difficulty lies in the apparent similarity of *maior* and *iustior*: why should Tacitus hesitate over the choice between 'great' and 'just' in describing Helvidius' action; and how is this consistent with his views of Helvidius elsewhere? Recent commentators have tended to one of two courses. The first is to invent a derogatory meaning for *maior*: in his commentary Chilver (or his editor Townend) glosses 'excessive rather than justified',² an interpretation now endorsed by Borgo.³ The second is to emend: Wellesley gives *inanior* for *maior* in his Leipzig Teubner, a reading which already underlies his Penguin translation, 'this act of retaliation,

¹ R. Kühner and C. Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache. Zweiter Teil: Satzlehre* (Hannover, 1962³), 2.524–31 on double indirect questions.

² G.E.F. Chilver and G.B. Townend, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories IV and V* (Oxford, 1985), 28, contradicting *ibid.* 7 (Tacitus' 'unrestrained praise' for Helvidius).

³ A. Borgo, 'Un costruito tacitano: *incertum an*', *Boll. Stud. Lat.* 39 (2009), 29–44, at 42 ('la sfumatura negativa di *maior*') with n. 58. See already A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum* (Leipzig, 1903), 799: 'pertinet ad 6.1 adpetentior famae'.

perhaps idle, perhaps justified, deeply divided the senate at the time',⁴ and which Levene follows with variation in the revised Oxford World's Classics translation, 'perhaps no less pointless than justified'.⁵ Before the merits of the emendation can be assessed, we must appreciate what makes this use of *incertum* different from every other in Tacitus: both adjectives are in the comparative degree. The options which Tacitus suspends are not 'X' and 'Y' but 'more X' and 'more Y'. If it is uncertain whether Helvidius' retaliation was 'greater' or 'more just' (to assume for a moment the reading of the *paradosis*), it was both. To put it another way, it was *so* great and *so* just that it would be hard to say which is the truer; and this is indeed how some translators take it.⁶

In his note on the passage,⁷ Heubner recognizes the comparatives and draws a useful parallel from the elder Pliny, who describes the construction of Rome's sewers under Tarquinius Priscus as *labor incertum maior an longior* (HN 36.107): here similarly the work was *both* arduous *and* drawn out. But he obscures the point by introducing other instances of *incertum ... an* which do not include comparatives, such as *Agricola* 7.3 (of Roscius Caelius' inability to keep order) *incertum suo an militum ingenio*.⁸ At first sight this looks no different: a finely balanced pair of discrete possibilities, between which Tacitus declines to adjudicate ('a reflection perhaps on him, perhaps on his soldiers').⁹ In Pliny's case the options are, strictly, no less discrete, since only one of the propositions 'the work was more arduous than drawn out' and 'the work was more drawn out than arduous' could be true. The resulting implication, however, has no 'perhaps' about it: the work was as arduous as it was long; it was *very* arduous and *very* drawn out. To suspend judgement between two comparatives, in other words, is to make a strong assertion that both qualities are abundant.¹⁰

Before weighing Wellesley's emendation, let me exemplify this idiom – and modern difficulties in understanding it – more fully, beginning with two instances of the same nature and period as *Histories* 4. In a letter the younger Pliny makes modest reference to his financial means, which include *reditus propter condicionem agellorum nescio minor an incertior* (Ep. 2.4.3). Radice translates 'being dependent on the way my property is farmed, my income is small or precarious', Walsh

⁴ K. Wellesley, *Tacitus. The Histories* (Harmondsworth, 1975³), 213. His 1989 Leipzig Teubner shares the market with the 1978 Stuttgart Teubner of H. Heubner.

⁵ W.H. Fyfe, rev. D.S. Levene, *Tacitus. The Histories* (Oxford, 1997), 174. Another suggestion is *maturior* (W.S. Watt, 'Tacitea', *AJPh* 109 [1988], 351–61, at 360–1).

⁶ G.G. Ramsay, *The Histories of Tacitus. An English Translation* (London, 1915), 300: 'as just as it was bold'; H. Goelzer, *Tacite Histoires* (Paris, 1921), 2.222: 'on ne saurait dire si elle fut plus noble ou plus légitime'; C.H. Moore, *Tacitus. LCL* 249 (Cambridge, MA, 1931), 3.13: 'at once notable and just'; J. Tapia Zuñiga, *Tácito. Historias III–V* (Mexico City, 1999), 66: 'incierto se más grande o más justa ...'.

⁷ H. Heubner, *P. Cornelius Tacitus. Die Historien. Kommentar. Band IV* (Heidelberg, 1976), 25: 'Tac. meint, es sei schwer zu sagen, was diese Vergeltungsaktion ihrem Wesen nach *mehr* war, spektakulär oder gerecht ...' (my emphasis).

⁸ There is similar failure to distinguish instances involving comparatives in *TLL* II (*an*) 11.38–58, V.1 (*dubius*) 2113.73–2114.28, and VII.1 (*incertus*) 878.84–879.6.

⁹ Leaving open criticism of both parties, as the context confirms. On Tacitean innuendo, see below, at n. 44.

¹⁰ One may contrast expressions where a comparative adjective or adverb is preferred over another, e.g. Livy 5.23.6 *triumphus ... clarior quam gratior*, Tac. Ann. 15.3.1 *compositius cuncta quam festinantius agerent*. Here the copula is *quam* not *an*; cf. Kühner–Stegmann (n. 1), 2.473–4, though they unhelpfully compare Sall. *Hist.* 4.1 (below, n. 25).

'because of the poor state of my modest farms, the returns are rather small or uncertain, I am not sure which'.¹¹ Pliny shows no such uncertainty: his income (he claims) is so small and so precarious that his only doubt concerns which is the greater difficulty. Frontinus begins his tract on aqueducts with an encomiastic nod to his emperor, *Nerva Augusto, nescio diligentiore an amantiore rei publicae imperatore* (Aq. 1). According to a recent commentator, 'the appositional phrase, especially with *nescio*, underscores a deliberate modesty ...'.¹² Far from it: Frontinus says that Nerva's care and love for the state are both so strong that he cannot say which is the greater. This is not doubt or modesty, but characteristic encomium of his *diligentissimus princeps*.¹³

We should not be misled by *nescio* into missing the affirmative force of the expression. Like the (different) phrase *nescio an*,¹⁴ this is an idiom, with an idiomatic sense. Most often it is a double indirect question weighing up two comparatives,¹⁵ introduced by an expression of uncertainty or of denial that certainty is possible, such as *dubium*, *incertum* and *nescio*.¹⁶ We are dealing here with a form of the rhetorical figure *dubitatio*, where the speaker feigns uncertainty at what to say.¹⁷ This includes the *aporia* common in hymns, panegyric and invective (*quid primum querar ...?*),¹⁸ and the more specific hesitation between two or more possibilities sometimes known as *diaporesis* (*iustitiaene prius mirer belline*

¹¹ B. Radice, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (Harmondsworth, 1963), 62 = *Pliny. Letters and Panegyricus*. LCL 59 (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 1.91; P.G. Walsh, *Pliny the Younger. Complete Letters* (Oxford, 2006), 33.

¹² R.H. Rodgers, *Frontinus. De aquaeductu urbis Romae* (Cambridge, 2004), 124; cf. M. Peachin, *Frontinus and the curae of the curator aquarum* (Stuttgart, 2004), 40: 'Nerva Augustus, an emperor whose attitude towards the state is one of special devotion or, perhaps better, of special love ...'.

¹³ For *diligentissimus princeps* cf. Aq. 64.1, 87.2, and see Rodgers (n. 12), 123–4, on the *diligentia* theme.

¹⁴ For *nescio an* (also *haud scio an*, *dubito an*, etc.) 'I rather think' (and later 'I doubt'), cf. OLD *nescio* 4, *scio* 4b; Kühner–Stegmann (n. 1), 2.520–3. Even when *nescio an* introduces a comparative (e.g. Sen. *Controv.* 2.4.5 *nescio an aduersus patrem iniuriosior*), there should be no confusion with our idiom, where a comparative also precedes *an*.

¹⁵ Or, as we shall see, a single comparative with multiple application. The indirect question is usually coordinated with *an*, whether or not introduced by *utrum*; more rarely it is formed with *uter* (e.g. Cic. *Sest.* 111, Livy 29.17.19, Sen. *Controv.* 7.8.6). A rhetorical direct question is equally possible but rare, e.g. Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.83 *utrum impudentius ab sociis abstulit an turpius meretrici dedit an ... an ...?* (to be distinguished from the rhetorical question in which uncertainty is implicitly denied, e.g. Cic. *Phil.* 11.10 *an uero hoc conferendum est aut dubitandum uter miserior sit ...?*).

¹⁶ As well as variants on these, such as *dubitare*, *in dubio/incerto esse* and *perincertum*, a wide range of expressions may introduce this double comparative, including: *difficile dictu est/sit* (Cic. *Clu.* 26, *Leg. Man.* 42; cf. Livy *Per.* 80), *nemo posset iudicare* (Cic. *Prov. cons.* 8; cf. [Caes.] *B Gall.* 8.13.4, Nep. *Att.* 12.5), *non possum statuere* (Cic. *De or.* 3.83), *deliberari non potest* (Sall. *Hist.* 1.77.3), *haud facile discerneres* (Livy 21.4.3), *uix existimari potest* (Livy 22.59.14), *uix ratio iniri potest* (Livy 29.17.19; cf. 28.8.3), *dinosci arduum est* (Val. Max. 5.6.6; cf. 6.8.5), *perpendi uix potest* (Val. Max. 8.15.7), *non facile dixerim* (Sen. *Ep.* 82.9), *non sit satis aestimare* (Plin. *HN* 7.1) and *non possum pronuntiare* (Plin. *Ep.* 5.18.2).

¹⁷ So *Rhet. Her.* 4.40, the first extant discussion: *dubitatio est, cum quaerere uideatur orator, utrum de duobus potius aut quid de pluribus potissimum dicat* (with G. Calboli, *Cornifici Rhetorica ad C. Herennium* [Bologna, 1969], 47 and 368–9).

¹⁸ Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 29; cf. e.g. Theoc. *Id.* 2.65 (with A.S. Gow, *Theocritus* [Cambridge, 1950], 2.48–9).

laborum?).¹⁹ According to Quintilian, this semblance of doubt encourages trust in the speaker's honesty;²⁰ the later rhetorician Alexander sees it as a way of achieving (courteous) indirectness.²¹ In Latin a particular type of *dubitatio* involving comparatives becomes established as an idiom which it seems convenient to call *dubitatio comparativa*.²² Since I have found no ancient or modern discussion of this figure,²³ it may be useful to offer some further examples and demonstrate its varieties, before returning to assess the sentences from Tacitus and the elder Pliny with which I began.

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So far we have seen cases in which the speaker cannot choose between complementary (but not identical) descriptions: Frontinus' Nerva, for instance, is so *diligens*, so *amans rei publicae*, that the difficulty lies in deciding which trait outdoes the other. Similarly Velleius cannot say whether Junius Blaesus was 'more useful in military or better in civic life' (*uiro nescias utiliore in castris an meliore in toga*), the younger Seneca produces an aphorism of Epicurus 'as true as it is eloquent' (*occurrit mihi ecce* [sc. *uox*] *nescio utrum uerius an eloquentius*), and Trogus' epitomator describes a war 'very easy and very profitable' (*bello dubium facili magis an uberi*).²⁴ The competing characteristics may equally be pejorative, as in Sallust's pronouncement on Lentulus Clodianus, *perincertum stolidior an uanior*, 'so thick-headed, so thoughtless, it is impossible to say which trait predominated',²⁵

¹⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 11.126 (Drances); cf. e.g. Cic. *Verr.* 2.1.122, Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.33–6, Stat. *Silv.* 2.2.44–5, Plin. *Pan.* 58.5.

²⁰ Quint. *Inst.* 9.2.19 *affert aliquam fidem ueritatis et dubitatio, cum simulamus quaerere nos unde incipiendum, ubi desinendum, quid potissimum dicendum, an omnino dicendum sit*. Later (9.3.88) Quintilian distinguishes *dubitatio* concerning *res*, i.e. what to say, from *dubitatio* concerning *uerbum*, i.e. how to say it (as in Dem. *De cor.* 20 εἴτε χρηὴ κακίαν εἴτ' ἀγνοίαν εἴτε καὶ ἀμφοτέρω ταύτ' εἰπεῖν). So far as Quintilian's dichotomy is useful, our idiom tends to the former type.

²¹ Alexander, *De figuris* 12.27–8 Spengel οὐκ ἀπορῶν ... ὁ λέγων αὐτὸς προσποιεῖται ἀπορεῖν καὶ μιμεῖται τὸν ἀποροῦντα ἐξ εὐθείας εἰπεῖν φυλαττόμενος. For other ancient discussions see H. Lausberg (tr. M.T. Bliss et al.), *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric* (Leiden, 1998), 343–4, and *TLL* V.1 (*dubitatio*) 2074.81–2075.20. Several Greek and Latin examples are gathered in H. Froberger (rev. G. Gebauer), *Ausgewählte Reden des Lysias für den Schulgebrauch I* (Leipzig, 1880), 198–200; see also H. Wankel, *Demosthenes, Rede für Ktesiphon über den Kranz* (Heidelberg, 1976), 1.209–10. Further on *dubitatio* ancient and modern, see B.M. Dupriez (tr. A.W. Halsall), *A Dictionary of Literary Devices* (London, 1991), 144–6; F. Népote-Desmarres and T. Tröger, 'Dubitatio', in G. Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik. Band 2* (Tübingen, 1994), 972–4.

²² I have not (yet) encountered any examples in Greek. Arguably a statement that something is *incertum* (sc. to everyone) is different from saying 'I don't know', but usage suggests that little or no difference in nuance was felt between e.g. Val. Max. 3.8 ext. 4 *uictoriam nescio laude an tormento maiore partam* and 8.7 ext. 11 *incertum ... discipulusne an praeceptor esses laudabilior*.

²³ It is, however, included in the versified *De ornamentis verborum* of Marbod of Rennes (s. xi–xii), whose four lines on *dubitatio* (§27) include the example *deformior an sis nequior ignoro*.

²⁴ Vell. Pat. 2.125.5 (the generalizing *nescias* tantamount, of course, to *sciri non potest*); Sen. *Ep.* 22.13; Trog. (Iust.) 38.7.6. There may be more than two propositions (cf. *Rhet. Her.* 4.40, n. 17 above), e.g. Apul. *Flor.* 18.134 (three), Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.83 (five).

²⁵ Sall. *Hist.* 4.1 Reynolds. This phrase was difficult even for Romans, to judge from Gell. *NA* 18.4 (where the fragment is preserved); the problem lay not in the idiom, but the perceived synonymy of the adjectives, since (as the other instances here show) they must be distinct, even if complementary. My translation follows L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius. An Antonine Scholar and his Achievements* (Oxford, 2003), 86 n. 14.

Sallust's Philippus on Lepidus, as base as he was cowardly (*qui peior an ignavior sit deliberari non potest*),²⁶ or the younger Seneca on anger, despicable and ugly in equal measure: *nescias utrum magis detestabile uitium sit an deforme*.²⁷

Dubitatio is also a productive way to balance two antithetical judgements in a *sententia*. Hannibal's combination of courage and cruelty, says Valerius Maximus, 'made it unclear whether he should be thought a greater or more dreadful man' (*in dubio maiorne an peior uir haberi deberet poneret*), that is, he was *maximus* and *pessimus* in one. The elder Pliny cannot say whether Nature has been a kinder parent or a crueller stepmother to humankind (*non ut sit satis aestimare, parens melior homini an tristior nouerca fuerit*): she has played both parts superlatively. Suetonius' Julius Caesar combined in war extremes of caution and boldness (*in obeundis expeditionibus dubium cautior an audentior*).²⁸

All these instances represent 'is something more X or more Y?'. The speaker may also ask himself 'is X or Y more —?', with the implication that both are very much so. A declaimer in the elder Seneca's *Controuersiae* says, 'I do not know whether the woman I have married is more wicked as a wife or as a stepmother' (*duxi nescio peiorem uxorem an nouercam*). Curtius Rufus has the condemned Philotas tell his father, 'I do not know who is more wretched, me in my youth or you in your old age' (*nescio, adulescentia mea miserior sit an senectus tua*). Suetonius evaluates Augustus' decision to retain sole power, 'unclear whether it was better in result or in intent' (*dubium euentu meliore an uoluntate*), that is, it was excellent in both.²⁹

Verbs are also compared in both these ways, as when Livy has tribunes attack a war 'as foolishly undertaken as it was rashly fought' (*utrum susceptum sit nequius an inconsultius gestum, dici non posse*) or Valerius Maximus produces a *mot* of Xerxes and remarks, 'a comment as insolent as unwise' (*nescias utrum insolentius dictum an imprudentius*); Florus proclaims Varro as bold in fleeing Cannae as Paulus was in staying to die: *ducum fugit alter, alter occisus est, dubium uter maiore animo: Paulum pudit, Varro non desperauit*.³⁰ More commonly *magis* or *minus* is applied to a single verb with two different subjects, objects, or both, as (respectively) in Nepos' aphorism *dubito interitu eius* [sc. *Ciceronis*] *utrum res publica an historia magis doleat*, Sallust on Sempronia, careless of money and reputation alike (*pecuniae an famae minus parceret, haud facile discerneres*), or when Horace imagines a panegyric wish that Augustus and the Roman people

²⁶ Sall. *Hist.* 1.77.3 R. Sallust likes this idiom: cf. *Cat.* 25.3, *Iug.* 24.3, 46.8, 74.1, 95.4 (twice: below, n. 40).

²⁷ Sen. *De ira* 1.1.4. Some other invective uses of our idiom are collected by R.G.M. Nisbet, *M. Tulli Ciceronis in L. Calpurnium Pisonem Oratio* (Oxford, 1961), 85, on Cic. *Pis.* 22.

²⁸ Val. Max. 9.6 ext. 2; Plin. *HN* 7.1 (turning to paradox Cic. *Rep.* 3.1 *apud* August. *Contra Iul.* 4.60; cf. also Quint. *Inst.* 12.1.2); Suet. *Iul.* 58.1.

²⁹ Sen. *Controv.* 9.6.4; Curt. 6.10.33; Suet. *Aug.* 28.1, which is not, then, 'brief to the point of obscurity' (J.C. Rolfe [rev. D.W. Hurley], *Suetonius*. LCL 31 [Cambridge, MA, 1997], 1.190, a note retained by Hurley despite A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius. The Scholar and his Caesars* [London, 1983], 111).

³⁰ Livy 41.7.9 (a double comparison: 'was A more B, or C more D?': cf. Val. Max. 8.15.7; [Quint.] *Decl. min.* 326.2); Val. Max. 9.5 ext. 2; Flor. 1.22.17 (after Livy 22.61.14). Silius Italicus' less forgiving view of Varro finds climactic expression in a *dubitatio comparativa*, as Paulus tells Rome she will never know whose existence to regret more, Varro's or Hannibal's (*Pun.* 9.637–9: *haud umquam expedites ... | quem tibi non nasci fuerit per uota petendum, | Varronem Hannibalemne magis*).

will compete for ever in mutual affection: *tene magis saluum populus uelit an populum tu, | seruet in ambiguo ... | Iuppiter*.³¹

Finally, two verbs with the same subject may be compared. Quintilian (*Inst.* 4.2.38) mocks orators who scorn simplicity of exposition when their ability to produce it is as lacking as their desire to (*quod tamquam facile contemnunt nescias praestare minus uelint an possint*). The younger Pliny (*Ep.* 3.3.1) writes to Corellia that he is unsure whether he admired or loved her father more (*suspexerim magis an amauerim dubitem*): he felt both emotions, of course, in abundance. In another letter (*Ep.* 8.12.1) he reports that *recitaturus est Titinius Capito, quem ego audire nescio magis debeam an cupiam*. No hesitation here: Pliny is as obliged to hear Capito (because of their friendship) as he is keen (because of Capito's qualities as performer).³² In these instances the two propositions are complementary; contrast a popular verdict on Marius reported by Livy and preserved by Seneca: *in incerto esse utrum illum magis nasci an non nasci ex re publica fuerit*.³³ Literally, 'it is unclear whether his being born more benefited the state or his not being born would have', the *sententia* is tantamount to 'Rome profited greatly by his birth, but would have profited greatly by his never having existed', or (mundanely) 'his birth was a great and yet terrible thing for Rome'.³⁴

As is now clear, *dubitatio comparativa* is used by a broad range of writers, mostly but not only in prose.³⁵ In pre-Classical verse, in Cicero and in Livy (who mostly confines it to speeches),³⁶ the syntax is an indirect question introduced by a main verb expressing doubt or denial that a judgement is possible.³⁷ This remains current with later authors, but beginning with Sallust (*Hist.* 4.1 R.) the idiom may be abbreviated by suppressing where possible the subordinate verb and using (most often) *nescio* or *dubium* extra-syntactically. When for instance Valerius Maximus writes *Claudius nescio religionis maior an patriae iniuria ...* ('Claudius, as great an affront to religion as to his country ...'), *nescio* is no longer functioning as

³¹ Nep. fr. 58; Sall. *Cat.* 25.3; Hor. *Epist.* 1.16.27–9 (with *dubitatio* in the implication that it is already impossible to tell who loves whom more).

³² Radice (n. 11) struggles: 'it is my duty – or perhaps urgent desire – to attend' (Penguin p. 219 = Loeb 2.31). Walsh (n. 11) has it right.

³³ Sen. *Q Nat.* 5.18.4, following Hine's text (Teubner 1996). Other restorations make Julius Caesar the subject: see H. Jal, *Tite-Live. Histoire Romaine. Tome XXXIII. Livre XLV. Fragments* (Paris, 1979), 253–6. The expression bears comparison with Sil. *Pun.* 9.637–9 (n. 30).

³⁴ Livy, *Per.* 80 preserves a different version, also with *dubitatio comparativa* and sententious balance: *haud facile sit dictu utrum bello melior an pace perniciosior fuerit*. Vell. *Pat.* 2.11.1 (also on Marius) shows how more or less the same conceit can be expressed with superlatives: *quantum bello optimus, tantum pace pessimus*.

³⁵ Some verse examples: Naev. fr. 115 Ribbeck³ *utrum scapulae plus an collus calli <mi> habeat, nescio*; Plaut. *Poen.* 1416 *nescias, utrum ei maiores buccaene an mammae sient*; Ov. *Met.* 10.659–60 *dubium Megareius heros | gaudeat an uirgo magis his Schoeneia dictis*; *Pont.* 4.7.23 [sc. *urbs*] *dubium positu melius defensa manune*; Stat. *Silv.* 4.4.21–2 *dubium morumne probandus | ingeniine bonis* depends on an unstated *magis*, a sign of the idiom's familiarity (it would otherwise be offensive); Sil. *Pun.* 9.637–9 (n. 30).

³⁶ Direct or indirect. An exception is Livy 21.4.3 (see also *Per.* 80, quoted in n. 34).

³⁷ e.g. Naev. fr. 115 R. and Plaut. *Poen.* 1416 (n. 35); Cic. *Orat.* 1 *utrum difficilium aut maius esset negare tibi saepius idem roganti an efficere id quod rogares diu multumque, Brute, dubitavi*. That Cicero opens his *Orator* with this complex variant (hesitating not, of course, between *difficilium* and *maius* but between *negare* and *efficere*) underlines its rhetorical prestige. For the range of expressions, see n. 16. Cicero and Livy both use such phrases considerably less than *nescio an* (unlike Sallust, who never uses the latter), and scarcely ever have *nescio* in our sense (Cic. *Sest.* 111; Brutus in Cic. *Ad Brut.* 2.3.4).

a main verb and *fuert* (vel sim.) is elided: Valerius cannot say whether Claudius was a greater affront to religion or to his country.³⁸ With or without ellipse, the idiom becomes well established in the early Principate as a convenient sententious formula:³⁹ by the mid-first century A.D. *dubitatio comparativa* is a routine and unambiguous Latin idiom.⁴⁰

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With this established, let me return to the two sentences with which I began. That of the elder Pliny, which is now relatively straightforward, I save for last. First the question of Tacitus' text in *Histories* 4.6.1: was Helvidius' revenge *incertum maior an iustior* or *incertum inanior an iustior*? Wellesley defends his emendation on three counts: (i) whereas *Histories* 4.5 lavishes praise on Helvidius, *Histories* 4.6 is framed less positively; (ii) the continuation of the sentence (*senatum in studia diduxerat*) 'means that a contrast must be implied between *magnus* and *iustus*'; (iii) 'the locution *incertum ... an* in Tacitus invariably involves contrary propositions'. He concludes that, with *inanior*, 'Tacitus hints that Helvidius was guilty of *inanis iactatio*'.⁴¹

Of the three claims, the third requires especial scrutiny.⁴² Wellesley is right that Tacitus always uses *incertum ... an* of contrary propositions. We saw *Agricola* 7.3 earlier; other instances include Augustus' last instructions to Tiberius, given *incertum metu an per inuidiam* (*Ann.* 1.11.4) and the cause of the fire of A.D. 64, *forte an dolo principis incertum* (*Ann.* 15.38.1).⁴³ These are all forms of *dubi-*

³⁸ Val. Max. 8.1 abs. 4, describing P. Claudius Pulcher, *cos.* 249 B.C.

³⁹ The prize goes to Valerius Maximus, whose *Memorabilia* include at least 17 instances (2.7.15, 3.1 ext. 1, 3.2.23, 3.8 ext. 4, 4.3.4, 4.6.1, 5.6.6, 6.4.4, 6.6.1, 6.8.5, 8.1 abs. 4, 8.7 ext. 11, 8.10.2, 8.15.7, 9.1 ext. 1, 9.5 ext. 2 and 9.6 ext. 2). Against this (and Sallust's eight; see nn. 25–6 above), I have noticed only around ten each in the far more extensively preserved Cicero and Livy. I make no claim to exhaustive coverage. M.W. Bloomer, *Valerius Maximus and the Rhetoric of the New Nobility* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), 256, notes that Valerius 'delights in the rhetorical figure of *dubitatio*' without elaborating. *Dubitatio comparativa* continues to flourish in post-Classical Latin: to give just a few examples, Tert. *De anim.* 25, Lactant. *Div. inst.* 5.2.2, Jer. *Ep.* 130.7 (redeploying Livy 22.59.14). Augustine, in good Ciceronian style (cf. *Verr.* 2.3.83 in n. 15), has it in direct questions too (e.g. *Ep.* 20.7 *quas agunt* [sc. *litterae tuae*] *gratias deo! quas impetrant a deo! blandiores sunt an ardentiores? luminosiores an fecundiores?*).

⁴⁰ Expressions of doubt in historical narrative merit a word: these can express genuine uncertainty on the part of the actors in the text but may also carry, at the narrator's level, the rhetorical force of *dubitatio*. So Sall. *Iug.* 38.6 *fugere an manere tutius foret, in incerto erat* (likewise Livy 10.20.10) can be taken literally (the soldiers did not know what the best course was) but also as narratorial comment (danger was on every side). Similarly *Iug.* 46.8 *absens an praesens* [sc. *Iugurtha*], *pacem an bellum gerens perniciosior esset, in incerto haberetur*; Tac. *Ann.* 15.36.4 *senatus et primores in incerto erant procul an coram atrociori haberetur* [sc. *Nero*]. When therefore Sallust produces a pair of *dubitationes comparativae* on Sulla (*Iug.* 95.4: *multi ... dubitauere, fortior an felicius esset; nam postea quae fecerit, incertum habeo pudeat an pigeat magis disserere*), one cannot restrict the rhetorical force to the second (*incertum habeo ...*), even though the first is focalized through *multi* (pace E. Koestermann, *C. Sallustius Crispus. Bellum Iugurthinum* [Heidelberg, 1971], 342).

⁴¹ K. Wellesley, 'Tacitus, "Histories": a textual survey, 1939–1989', *ANRW* 2.33.3 (1991), 1651–85, at 1674–5. *inanis iactatio* refers to *Ag.* 42.3.

⁴² The first is true, but not decisive. The second depends on assuming that *incertum ... an* is focalized through the senate, which may or may not be so; in any case, *senatum in studia diduxerat* is explained by the following clause (condemnation of Eprius would herald disaster for many others).

⁴³ *Ann.* 6.23.1 *sponte uel necessitate incertum habebatur*, 14.9.2 *incertum caritate in patronam an metu exitii*, 14.51.1 *incertum ualeitudine an ueneno* bring the total to six. Although in some

tatio: the posed indecision has a rhetorical force characteristic of and crucial to Tacitus' narrative.⁴⁴ But none of these instances involves comparatives. Even with the paradoxis, *Histories* 4.6.1 does present two contrary propositions: Helvidius' revenge was either greater than it was just, or juster than it was great. As in other instances of *incertum ... an*, Tacitus holds back from endorsing either proposition, but here – like every other *dubitatio comparativa* that we have seen – the pose of indecision adds up to a strong assertion. In the other cases he implies 'either, or both, could be true'; here the inevitable force is 'both are abundantly true'.

This substantially changes the effect of Wellesley's emendation. In either reading Tacitus is explicit that Helvidius' action was wholly justified (*iustior*).⁴⁵ With *inanior* he would be equally explicit – not 'hinting' – that he considers it wholly *inanis*. Two problems arise. First, what would the meaning of *inanis* be? The context (a quasi-prosecution) and the collocation with *iustior* bring 'unjustified' to mind,⁴⁶ but that is logically impossible: Helvidius' action could not be 'wholly unjustified and wholly justified'. The alternative is a meaning in the region of 'futile, pointless',⁴⁷ but that would be an undesirable implication in narrative terms. Helvidius' ongoing quarrel with Eprius, to which this attempted *ultio* is both prelude and *mise en abyme*, is central to the senatorial scenes of *Histories* 4. To dismiss it out of hand almost before it has begun would sever the dramatic tension which underpins these narrative panels and binds them together.⁴⁸ The second problem is the tone of dismissal which *inanis* would import. To appeal to the *Agricola*'s famous attack on *ambitiosa mors* (*Agr.* 42.3–4) is inadequate: it is well observed that Tacitus takes a more nuanced line on Helvidius, and on Thrasea Paetus in the *Annals*, than he does on the 'meaningless' deaths he attacks in the early monograph.⁴⁹ In Helvidius' case as in Thrasea's, Tacitus both insinuates less

cases the uncertainty is attributed to actors in the text (*Ag.* 7.3, *Ann.* 14.9.2, 14.51.1), in all six it (also) claims doubt on the narrator's part (for such slippage, cf. n. 40).

⁴⁴ E. Aubrion, *Rhétorique et histoire chez Tacite* (Metz, 1985), 151 n. 1, dismisses *Hist.* 4.6.1 as 'purement rhétorique'. The bibliography on Tacitus' use of alternatives is extensive (most recently Borgo [n. 3], who lumps *Hist.* 4.6.1 with other *incertum ... an* and indeed *incertum an* constructions). For a helpful critical survey, see P. Sinclair, 'Rhetorical generalizations in *Annales* 1–6. A review of the problem of innuendo and Tacitus' integrity', *ANRW* 2.33.4 (1991), 2795–831.

⁴⁵ Tacitus' dislike for the unsavoury but powerful Eprius is as clear here (cf. also *Hist.* 2.95.3) as later in *Ann.* 16.28–9. It is hard not to see a reference to him in Tacitus' proemial attack on delators, not least given the parallel of *Hist.* 1.2.3 *agerent uerterent cuncta odio et terrore* ~ *Dial.* 8.3 *agunt feruntque cuncta*.

⁴⁶ e.g. *Ann.* 3.8.2, 3.13.1, 16.8.1; cf. Gerber and Greef (n. 3), 611; *TLL* VII.1 (*inanis*) 824.68–72. The closest parallel for the pair *inanis*–*iustus* depends on this meaning, and does nothing for Wellesley's case (Curt. 4.13.5 *uanis et inanibus militem magis quam iustis formidinis causis moueri*).

⁴⁷ Gerber and Greef (n. 3), 611, divide these into two separate headings, 'bedeutungslos, werthlos' and 'erfolglos, nutzlos', but the distinction is hardly clear.

⁴⁸ cf. *Hist.* 4.10, ending the first senatorial panel: *nec tam Musonius aut Publius quam Priscus et Marcellus ceterique, motis ad ultionem animis, expectabantur*.

⁴⁹ The *Agricola*'s attack is rhetorically conditioned: those lines justify the conformism of an *Agricola*, a Tacitus and a Trajan. Contrast *Agr.* 2.1, where Thrasea and Helvidius earn early mention as Tacitus decries the futile (*scilicet* ...) censorship of the former regime. For a subtle recent contribution to the long debate over Tacitus and the 'Stoic opposition', see D. Sailor, *Writing and Empire in Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2008), 11–24. Even Sailor, who argues that Tacitus is harder on Thrasea than most think, sees a significant difference between the frontal assault of *Agr.* 42.4 and the more delicate insinuation in the later works.

commendable self-seeking and augurs 'great glory'.⁵⁰ Nowhere in the *Histories* or *Annals* does he explicitly damn their actions or intentions as futile.⁵¹ Far from being consistent with Tacitus' broader views, *inanius* in *Histories* 4.6.1 would tip the delicate balance significantly.

By contrast, *maior* is preferable on several fronts: other authors' uses of *dubitatio* with extra-syntactical *incertum*, and other Tacitean instances of *dubitatio comparativa*, all involve complementary, not contrastive, pairs,⁵² and the only lexical parallel supports it.⁵³ It is, to be sure, semantically slippery, but a sense in the region 'difficult (to accomplish), daring' is common enough,⁵⁴ and wholly congruent with the picture Tacitus paints of Eprius, as powerful (and thus untouchable) as he is guilty.⁵⁵ At the same time, the *ultio* is 'great' in that the crime was great: it is not just the chance ending of the *Annals* which raises Eprius' victim Thrasea to the status of Neronian victim par excellence.⁵⁶ Helvidius' attack was a game with high stakes. To say as much need not exclude a note of criticism (Helvidius might have known better); indeed, this suits Tacitus' manner of indirect ambivalence far better than would an outright dismissal. Helvidius' undertaking was as bold as it was just.

* * *

The text of the elder Pliny's *sententia* on Augustan deification is not in doubt, yet has caused the greatest trouble of all. In a famous passage he lists the first emperor's woes by way of final proof that even the most fortunate man he can name had his fair share of troubles (*HN* 7.147–50). The catalogue ends with a sententious reference to the emperor's apotheosis and the succession: *in summa deus ille caelumque nescio adeptus magis an meritis herede hostis sui filio excessit* (*HN* 7.150).⁵⁷ In her commentary Beagon translates, 'In the end, this god (whether

⁵⁰ Self-seeking: *Hist.* 4.6.1 *erant quibus appetentior famae uideretur* (cf. *Ann.* 14.49.3). Glory: *Hist.* 4.4.3 *isque praecipuus illi dies magnae offensae initium et magnae gloriae* (cf. *Ann.* 15.23.4). The several proleptic glances at Helvidius' death (*Hist.* 4.4.3, 4.5.1, 4.9.2) and his entry in the proem's catalogue of exemplars (*Hist.* 1.3.1 *constantes generi* advertises the *gener* ... *constans* of 4.5.2) give no reason to suppose his death scene would not rival Thrasea's (*Ann.* 16.34–5).

⁵¹ *Ann.* 14.12.1 comes closest; it is offset by *Ann.* 14.49.1. At *Ann.* 16.26.5 Tacitus has Thrasea himself counsel Arulenus against endangering himself to no purpose.

⁵² Sall. *Hist.* 4.1 *perincertum stolidior an uanior*; Plin. *HN* 36.107 *labor incertum maior an longior*; Tac. *Hist.* 1.69.1 *haud facile dictu est, legati Heluetiorum minus placabilem imperatorem an militem inuenerint*; *Ann.* 4.34.5 (Cordus) *haud facile dixerim, moderatione magis an sapientia*. By far the majority of all such *dubitationes* involve complementary pairs; the exceptions are usually climactic *sententiae* (cf. n. 57).

⁵³ *maior ultio* in [Quint.] *Decl. mai.* 9.18.9; *inanis ultio* is unparalleled. Other pairings of *maior* and *iustior* are complementary, not contrastive: Livy 21.53.1 (*fama uictoriae*) and Sen. *De ira* 2.10.2 (*excusatio*).

⁵⁴ Cf. especially Cic. *Orat.* 1 (n. 37), where *difficilius* and *maius* are presented as virtual synonyms; also Plin. *HN* 36.107 (n. 52); *OLD* *magnus* 10 and *maior* 4d.

⁵⁵ In *Hist.* 4.43.1 the favourable reception of Curtius Montanus' speech makes Helvidius think that 'even' Eprius might be vulnerable (*posse etiam Marcellum prosterni*). Though the scene quickly dissolves, it is significant that this is the last – greatest – of the attempts at revenge before Mucianus shuts down debate.

⁵⁶ Note *Ann.* 16.21.1 *uirtutem ipsam excindere* – written later, but with no sign of a change of view.

⁵⁷ In employing this idiom in a closing *sententia*, Pliny follows a tendency of Valerius Maximus, who uses it in this way seven times of the seventeen listed (n. 39). Note especially

deified by machination or merit I cannot tell) died leaving his enemy's son as his heir', noting 'apparent cynicism' on Pliny's part.⁵⁸ Though 'machination' is an extreme case of abusing *adipisci*, this interpretation represents scholarly consensus:⁵⁹ interpreters have felt obliged to make the two options antithetical, and/or to rewrite the syntax.⁶⁰ We have seen instances where *magis ... an* sets up an antithesis, but we have also seen that it can coordinate complementary verbal ideas, as with the younger Pliny's *suspexerim magis an amauerim dubitem*.⁶¹ We have also seen that *dubitatio comparativa* without exception amounts to an endorsement of both propositions: even if one could make *adeptus* mean 'machinate', this would yield the unlikely claim that Augustus wholly machinated *and* wholly deserved his deification.

Confusion has perhaps been caused by Pliny's use of *magis* with the non-quantitative verb *adipisci*: how can one 'more attain' something? Yet *magis* modifies not the verbs but the two statements, *caelum adeptus est* and *caelum meritus est*. One might compare another sentence from Tacitus: *magis bellum desierat quam pax coeperat* (*Hist.* 4.1.1), 'it was more the case that war had ended than that peace had begun'. Tacitus makes his rhetorical point by staging his selection of words ('I should rather say ... than ...'). Pliny's phrase works similarly, except that Pliny does *not* know which he should rather say, that Augustus reached heaven (*caelum adeptus*)⁶² or that he deserved it (*meritus*).⁶³ In other words, he asserts that both are unquestionably true. If any doubt remains, the uniformly ignored *-que* should

Val. Max. 9.6 ext. 2 on Hannibal, Pliny *HN* 7.1 on Nature (both quoted at n. 28) and Livy *apud Sen. Q Nat.* 5.18.4 (at n. 33) on Marius. These last three aphorisms all use the idiom to generate a paradoxical combination of positive and negative. In *HN* 7.150 the 'point' is a different one.

⁵⁸ M. Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal. Natural History Book 7* (Oxford, 2005), 92 and 352, where she offers the alternative suggestion that Pliny does not mean what he says (he 'may just be elaborating the rhetorical antithesis').

⁵⁹ Cf. H. Rackham, *Pliny. Natural History*. LCL 352 (Cambridge, MA, 1942), 2.607: 'In fine, this god – whether deified more by his own action or by his merits I know not ...', followed with slight variation by B. Baldwin, 'Roman emperors in the Elder Pliny', *Scholia* 4 (1995), 56–78, at 61. Beagon's 'in the end' is also inaccurate: *in summa* means 'to cap it all' (*OLD summa* 8b).

⁶⁰ G. Ranucci in A. Borghini et al., *Plinio, Storia naturale II. Antropologia e zoologia. Libri 7–11* (Turin, 1983), 95: 'insomma quel dio, che raggiunse il cielo, forse, più di quanto non lo meritasse ...': that would be *nescio an adeptus magis quam meritus*. Similarly R. Schilling, *Plinie L'Ancien. Histoire naturelle Livre VII* (Paris, 1977), 94: 'ce dieu qui doit peut-être l'apothéose plus au sort qu'au mérite'. The same misunderstanding hampers the attempt of B. Manuwald, *Cassius Dio und Augustus: Philologische Untersuchungen zu den Büchern 45–56 des dionischen Geschichtswerkes* (Wiesbaden, 1979), 164 n. 130, to defend a rare reading of the sentence as laudatory: 'Plinius ... hat ... Zweifel, ob man nicht eher sagen soll, daß Augustus sich den Himmel (gegen alle Widrigkeiten) geradezu erringen mußte, als daß man (einfachhin) sagen kann, er habe den Himmel als Würdigung seiner Leistung und seiner *felicitas* erhalten'. This gloss gets halfway to understanding the idiom ('sagen soll'), but 'ob man nicht eher ... als daß' implies again *nescio an ... magis quam*.

⁶¹ *Ep.* 3.3.1; cf. 8.12.1 (both quoted above).

⁶² *caelum adeptus* can be taken to mean both 'reached heaven' (*caelum* as physical goal: *OLD adipiscor* 1b) and 'won [a place in] heaven' (*caelum* as synonym for *immortalitatem*, e.g. *Cic. Red. sen.* 3). Cf. R. Till, 'Plinius über Augustus (nat. hist. 7,147–150)', *WJA* n.F. 3 (1977), 127–37, at 136 n. 48. This makes a novel partner for the common formula *caelum mereri* (*TLL III [caelum]* 84.8–10 and *VIII [mereo]* 804.13–15).

⁶³ If Pliny is being innovative, it is characteristic of his daring or, as some think, misguided approach to Latin. For a measured treatment of his style, see H. Pinkster, 'The language of Pliny the Elder', in T. Reinhardt, M. Lapidge and J.N. Adams (edd.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose* (Oxford, 2005), 239–56.

remove it: the articulation makes clear that *deus ille* and *caelum ... meritis* are complementary, not contrastive, thoughts.⁶⁴

Pliny is far from expressing 'scepticism' about the first emperor's divinity; he does not 'insert and twist the dagger', nor even 'cast shadows' on Augustus.⁶⁵ On the contrary, and not surprisingly in a writer who anticipates glorious deification for Vespasian (*HN* 2.18–19), the apotheosis of Divus Augustus is accompanied by unqualified affirmation.⁶⁶ This is, indeed, essential to the point of the *sententia*, which does not concern deification *per se*, but lies in the contrast of that ultimate good fortune with Augustus' final and ultimate misfortune, to be succeeded by Tiberius.⁶⁷ 'To crown it all, that god, who both reached heaven and earned it, died with his enemy's son as heir.' *nescio clarius an certius*.⁶⁸

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⁶⁴ It is epexegetic (cf. *OLD* -que 6a; Kühner–Stegmann [n. 1], 1.25–6): the second phrase affirms and expands the first.

⁶⁵ Respectively the views of K. Scott, 'The Elder and Younger Pliny on emperor worship', *TAPhA* 63 (1932), 156–65, at 158; Baldwin (n. 59), 61; Ranucci (n. 60), 95 ('la frase è alquanto oscura e, in ogni caso, getta ulteriori ombre sulla figura di Augusto'). The most substantial discussions of *HN* 7.147–50 both maintain that Pliny's final *sententia* calls Augustus' deification into doubt (Till [n. 62], 136; B. Tautz, *Das Bild des Kaisers Augustus in der Naturalis Historia des Plinius* [Trier, 1999], 362–87, especially 364 and 373), even though Pliny's argument here depends on Augustus' being the paragon of *felicitas*.

⁶⁶ It is true that 'reached heaven and earned it' might open up a fault line, the question how far any (other) emperor deserved his deification, but, to judge from both idiom and context, Pliny seeks not to explore semantic difference but to bind *adeptus* and *meritis* together in strong affirmation. There is of course no question of Pliny's believing in *literal* ascension or the physical 'reality' of gods (cf. *HN* 2.14–27). The phrase *deus ... excessit* is accordingly less paradoxical than generally claimed (e.g. Beagon [n. 58], 352): cf. e.g. Vell. Pat. 1.2.1 *Hercules ad deos excesserat*, and Tacitus' title *Ab excessu diui Augusti*.

⁶⁷ A climactic *mise en abyme*, then, of Pliny's argument in *HN* 7.147–50. Here is not the place for an assessment of Augustus' and Tiberius' presentation in *HN* as a whole. On Augustus, see the bibliography mentioned above and G. Binder, 'Auguste d'après les informations de la *NH*', in J. Pigeaud and J. Oroz (edd.), *Pline l'Ancien: témoin de son temps* (Salamanca and Nantes, 1987), 461–72. Tiberius is less widely treated; Baldwin (n. 59), 60–7, finds him and Augustus similarly taxed as well as praised in *HN*. In all cases except Binder (who does not mention it), the misreading of *HN* 7.150 is taken as a key witness of Pliny's views.

⁶⁸ Several people offered helpful comments on drafts of this article; especial thanks are due to Stephen Oakley, Michael Reeve and *CQ*'s anonymous reader.