Surveillance, Quotation, and the Chief Task of Annals
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Tacitus is a historian especially concerned with words and their circulation. The Annals, in particular, incorporate epigrammatic sententiae of individual senators, quips of emperors, and even, on occasion, short utterances that the historian claims are “authentic words” (ipsa verba) to a much greater degree than other narrative historians (Mayer 2010, Laird 1999, Sinclair 1995). In one of his most famous (and disputed) programmatic passages, Tacitus asserts that such a commemoration of sententiae is a “chief duty of Annals (3.65.2, praecipuum munus annalium), and, indeed, many characters in Tacitus are memorably fixed in the reader’s mind through the historian’s quotation of an outstanding dictum or, conversely, an exceptionally dishonorable one. But the historian’s practice has a dark mirror in the maiestas trials that are a leitmotiv of the Annals where, at least in Tacitus’ account, victims are prosecuted for utterances taken out of context (e.g. 6.7.3: perinde in foro, in conivio, quaqua de re locuti incusabantur) or deliberately misconstrued – a charge that can well be applied to Tacitus’ own use of quotations (see e.g. Levick 1978).

In this paper, I argue that Tacitus’ treatment of quotation, both his own practice and that of the hated delatores’, reflects a longstanding rhetorical tradition of “invidious” quotation, compounded by contemporary anxieties about the quotation as a form of surveillance in an autocratic society. There is little evidence more incontrovertible than an opponent’s own words, but this old trick of invective becomes more fraught once an overheard quip, a reported conversation, or a passage from a published work can be made the basis of the dreaded treason charge. In order to “rescue” the reporting of speech for his own practice, Tacitus consistently depicts quoted words and writings that reveal the truth in spite of attempts to twist their meaning. Focusing on the Tiberian books of the Annals, I show that documents resulting from surveillance and utterances recorded for use in prosecutions regularly backfire and reveal truths that the emperor or his informers would prefer had remained hidden. The defendants may be convicted, but the acts of quotation themselves become, in Tacitus’ narrative, a commemoration and proof of the accusers’ disgrace. This pattern of recirculated and recorded words shown to be impervious to manipulation upholds Tacitus’ use of his subject’s “own words” as veridical indices of their character and motivations, and it demonstrates the historian’s contention that the truth will out in spite of the attempts by “present power” to control the judgment of posterity (Ann. 4.35.5).

Bibliography

