Fighting for Liberty, Embracing Slavery: 
Tacitus, Annals 1.7.1 

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The account of Tiberius’ reign in Tacitus’ Annals famously begins with the murder of the exiled Agrippa Postumus on the isle of Planasia (1.6). As the structure of the narrative suggests, Tiberius and Livia were at the time almost certainly still at Nola, where Augustus had died shortly before (1.5). In any event, the new princeps and his mother were not yet in Rome, when, in the first sentence of the subsequent chapter, the narrative shifts to the imperial capital:

At Romae ruere in servitium consules, patres, eques. (1.7.1)

Expressive both of indignation and agitation, these words indeed form an “arresting beginning” (F. Goodyear), as Tacitus comes to paint a striking picture of the flagrant complacency and sycophancy of the consuls, senators and equestrians in Rome. In addition to marking a topographical transition, at Romae... sqq. may also be seen as setting up a contrast between Tiberius’ apparent intention to involve the senators as peers in political affairs (and Sallustius Crispus’ contrary stance that the princeps alone should remain at the helm) on the one hand (1.6), and the servile behaviour of the mentioned groups on the other.¹

¹ Primum facinas novi principatus iuit Postumi Agrippae caedes (1.6.1).
³ R. Martin in Goodyear (n. 2), 137 ad loc. correctly calls attention to the transition from Nola to Rome. His view, however, according to which Ann. 1.6 is “structurally indicated as a digression,” is not convincing.

The vivid effect of the verb ruere is reinforced both by the historic infinitive and the alliteration with Romae, whilst the tripartite asyndeton at the end of the sentence adds further force to the precipitance of the imagery. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of servitium and (by definition, the free) consules alongside the state’s two upper echelons produces a pointed paradox. ‘Liberty’ and the ‘consulate’ were, after all, the hallmarks of the res publica and thus in stark contrast to any form of political bondage or subjugation as implied in the term and (metaphorical) usage of servitium. Virtually a truism, this fundamental notion nevertheless marks the very outset of the Annals. The first paragraph with its brief overview of Roman history in terms of ‘power’ opens as follows: Urbem Romam a principio reges habuerunt; libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit (1.1.1).

There is, however, more to the powerful phrase at Ann. 1.7.1, for the sentence recalls a verse from Vergil’s Aeneid:

*Aeneidae in ferrum pro libertate rubeant. (8.648)*

The line is from the famous description of the shield of Aeneas – itself an epitome of Roman history – and occurs in the fourth scene depicting an episode from the end of the regal period and the beginning of the Republic (Aen. 8.646–51). This episode involves the Etruscan ruler of Clusium, Lars Porsenna, who was trying to reinstate the expelled Tarquinius Superbus in Rome while his citizens resisted his pressure with force of arms in order to defend their newly won freedom from tyranny. Two individuals among the Romans are singled out for their bravery: Horatius Cocles for his heroic exploits at a bridge spanning the Tiber, and Caelia who broke her shackles and swam across that same river to safety. In short, the vignette advertises the establishing of libertas and the Romans’ dauntless virtus in fighting for its preservation. At the same time, it poses a contrast to the incident as described by Tacitus.

To be sure, these scenarios are also to be found in Livy (2.9–13), and like Vergil, the historian conceives Porsenna’s assault on Rome as part of her struggle for freedom against the dangers of tyranny. It is even safe to assume that this celebrated incident figured prominently also in other narratives of the historiographical and exemplary traditions, the majority of which are no longer extant; moreover, that it was part of Rome’s ‘collective memory,’ which is to say that – regardless of whatever mode of writing – it was also handed down orally and visually, and formed part of the general historical knowledge.

Yet the verbal affinity between Tacitus’ ruere in servitium and Vergil’s in ferrum pro libertate rubeant strongly suggests that the historian specifically had the poet in mind. Both the collocation of ruere in + accusative and the juxtaposition of (a form of) ruere + a symbolic principle representative of the respective form of government are telling similarities. Likewise, in both passages the citizens of Rome are the grammatical subject of the sentence: consules, patres, eques and Aeneadæ respectively.

The possibility of a deliberate reference becomes all the more likely given that Tacitus is known to echo Vergil’s famous epic elsewhere in his work. For instance, an unequivocal allusion to a passage in the Aeneid follows only three paragraphs later in Annals 1.10. There, in the negative assessment of Augustus, the designation machinator doli echoes the doli fabricator of Aen. 2.264, thereby playing on Vergil’s narrative of deceit, invasion and slaughter, and thus insinuating the true character of the first princeps.
In addition to such specific verbal links, it is perhaps worth noting that the *Annals* and the *Aeneid* share structural similarities, such as the obituary at the ends of books, or the ‘delayed preface’ placed in the first book of the epic's second half (7.37-45) and the Tiberian hexam's second half (4.32) respectively.

Once the Vergilian intertext is thus recognized as the crucial link between the passage in Tacitus and the historical events of 508 BCE, this confrontation between now and then fully brings to the fore Tacitus' inherent sarcasm. The contemporaries of Tiberius are not simply compared to and contrasted with any given Romans from the Republican past. Instead, they are pitted against the first generation of Romans which established the Republic. In fact, the two consuls of 14 CE, Sex. Pompeius and Sex. Appuleius, can be seen in direct contrast to Horatius Coles and Cloelia. Measured by the truly ‘Republican’ ethics of the citizens – both male and female – of the old Republic, the top ranking (Republican) magistrates of 14 CE appear as spineless and preposterous fools, inasmuch as they are the first to swear allegiance to the new princeps (1.7.2); for while Horatius Coles and Cloelia are regarded as iconic embodiments of *vir* _sus_ and in particular of *fortitudo_, the two consuls disgracefully display the polar opposite.

The transitory status of Rome in the Vergilian vignette, that is, her transition from the regal to the Roman form of government, is a particularly apt analogy for Tacitus’ intent. At the beginning of his account of Tiberius’ reign, the historian is at pains to demonstrate the renewed political shift and constitutional ambivalence at Rome. The allusion to Vergil adds an intriguing layer of meaning to Tacitus’ description of the affairs at Rome, namely by evoking a suggestive contrast which in turn lends further cynical overtones to the passage at hand. In light of the events in 508 BCE – which eventually resulted in the firm establishment of _libertas_ – a reversal of the same can be witnessed in 14 CE. As the Roman’s lack of courage now contributed to the undoing of the hard-fought achievements of their forefathers, the loss of _libertas_ also entailed, as it were, the return of a ‘Tarquinius Superbus’ to Rome. Thus, with the new Principate implicitly portrayed as a new tyranny and Tiberius as a new tyrant, the stage is set for the chronicle of this ruler whose reign is covered in the first six books of the *Annals*.

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18 On the chronology, see Roller (n. 11) 28 n. 65.
19 *Sex. Pompeius et Sex. Appuleius consules primi in urbe Tiberi Caesaris turvare* (...) *max senatu mileque et populus*. The irony of the present situation (cf. Goodyear [n. 2] 139 ad *senatus mileque*...) is brought out all the more, by the mention of the “old Republic” in the subsequent sentence (see n. 21).
20 Horatius and Cloelia are listed under the category of *fortitudo* in Valerius Maximus’ collection (3.2.1–2); Horatius is moreover noted for his love of the fatherland (4.1.2); Cf. Roller (n. 11) 51 and passim on the possible contestation of the *exempla*’s meanings.
21 Cf. *Ann. 1.7.3: nam Tiberius cuncta per consules incipiat tamquam veere re publica*. See also the political options voiced in the form of rumors by contemporaries of the failing Augustus (1.4.2).
23 Notice the wordplay generating a circular structure in the very first paragraph of the *Annals* (1.1.1): From its beginning (*a principio*), kings held the city of Rome. After many centuries of Republican freedom, however, Roman history eventually came full circle when Augustus seized power (*nomine principis*), but факtuALLY as a monarch (cf. Goodyear [n. 2] 88 ad loc.). To be sure, this piece of ring-composition implies that the return to monarchy was already completed under Augustus. In *Ann. 1.7.1*, nevertheless, Tacitus likes to stress the acquiescence of the Romans and their failure to react defiantly.
24 In *Sen. ad Marc. 16* the *exemplum* of Cloelia is adduced to the effect that the comparison entails a reproach of today’s effeminate youth.
25 See also Cic. *Phil. 3.8–11*. In his address to the Senate, Cicero, holding up *libertas* against *servitus*, calls for a condemnation of Mark Antony as a public enemy; to back up his statement, Cicero compares the present political situation to the circumstances of 508 BCE and the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus. Cf. also the disagreement in Cassius Dio between Cicero and O. Fufius Calenus as to how Antony measures up to other defenders of *libertas* such as Horatius (45.31–2; 46.19.8).