

Epic History: The Hexametric Opening of Tacitus' *Annals*

Abstract: The significance of the hexameter with which Tacitus begins his *Annals* continues to be debated among scholars. After surveying the various opinions, Goodyear (1972, 89 ff.) inclines to follow those who argue that due to its rhythmical irregularity it may have even been unconsciously produced. Of those who do recognize it as intentional, some (Wölfflin 1867, Köhm 1922) argue that it alludes to Livy and Sallust; Kloss (2009, 138 fn. 31) followed by Allendorf (2017, 141 fn. 18) argues that the rhythmical irregularities mark the hexameter as Ennian; Miller (1992, 97) and several others see the rhythm as a way of opening the *Annals* on "a deliberately heroic note."

In this paper I will argue that the various interpretations of the hexameter outlined above do not adequately account for its complexity. The *Annals* is a difficult and stylistically allusive history, and the opening sentence anticipates the form of the whole. It is not, however, an epic history, as Miller's interpretation might suggest. In a famous digression in Book IV (32-33), Tacitus (seemingly) admits that much of the subject matter of his *Annals* will seem trifling and petty (*parva... et levia memoratu*) in contrast to the grand events of the Roman Republic. Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* might aspire to something like the status of Epic, but Tacitus's account of emperors incompetent or base or both and of the intrigues in the imperial house cannot.

Using these comments by Tacitus to interpret the opening, I argue that the hexameter is polyphonic. If the original title was *Ab Excessu Divi Augusti*, the reader knows from the very beginning where he is headed, which is not in the direction of Epic. On this level the hexameter creates an effect of dissonance, and this is supported by the metrical irregularity. However, because Sallust and Livy had also made use of hexameters in their histories, it simultaneously

opens up an intertextual dialogue with the historiographic tradition. Further, Tacitus begins with the age of kings, which is long gone but certainly epically colored. Thus, what to Goodyear seemed an ungainly hexameter operates on various levels to situate the *Annals* relative to poetic and prosaic discourse. I conclude by speculatively suggesting that one other voice of the hexameter may be in movement toward a redefinition of Epic.

List of Works Cited

- Allendorf, Tobias, "Sounds and Space: Seneca's Horatian Lyrics." In *Horace and Seneca: Interactions, Intertexts, Interpretations*, ed. Andreas T. Zanker, Kathrin Winter, Martin Stöckinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 137-158.
- Goodyear, F.R.D., *The Annals of Tacitus*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972
- Kloss, Gerrit, "Von Zeiten und Rhythmen zu Tac. ann. 3,55," *Wiener Studien*, 122 (2009): 125-143.
- Köhm, J., "Zum Hexameter im Anfang der Annalen des Tacitus," *Philologische Wochenschrift* 1922): 1174-6
- Miller, N.P., *Tacitus: Annals Book I*. (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1992)
- Wölfflin, E. "Jahresberichte über Tacitus 2," *Philologus*, 26 (1867): 92-166