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Tacitus, Stoic *exempla*, and the *praecipuum munus annalium*

Tacitus' claim that history should inspire good deeds and deter bad ones (*Annals* 3.65) should be taken seriously: his *exempla* are supposed to help his readers think through their own moral difficulties. This approach to history is found in historians with clear connections to Stoicism, and in Stoic philosophers like Seneca. It is no coincidence that Tacitus is particularly interested in the behavior of Stoics like Thrasea Paetus, Barea Soranus, and Seneca himself. They, and even non-Stoic characters like Epicharis and Petronius, exemplify the behavior necessary if Roman freedom was to survive the monarchy.

Exsequi sententias haud institui nisi insignes per honestum aut notabili dedecore, quod praecipuum munus annalium reor, ne virtutes sileantur utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit.

Tac. *Ann.* 3.65.1¹

The claim that history should inspire good deeds and deter bad ones has often been seen as purely conventional; scholars like Bessie Walker and Ronald Syme saw Tacitus as more interested in hard-nosed analysis, and dismissed his remark as a mere relic of tradition.² But T. J. Luce pointed out that it was in fact rare for historians to claim that their readers would be deterred, or inspired, by the prospect of becoming part of the historical record.³ And this prompted Tony

I am grateful to Margaret Graver, Brad Inwood, Martha Nussbaum for some informal communications, and to Liana Katz, Martin Ostwald, and Bryce Walker for reading an earlier draft.

1. Citations of the *Annals* and the *Histories* are from the Teubner editions of Heubner 1983 and 1989; all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2. Walker 1952: 1–2; Syme 1958: 521; Fornara 1983: 118 speaks of Tacitus here paying “lip service” to “the connection of examples and didacticism.”

3. Luce 1991.

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Woodman to argue that the passage is not the sweeping statement about history that it is normally taken to be: on Woodman's view it means that one purpose (only) of senatorial history (only) was to single out for praise and blame proposals made in the Senate.⁴

In this paper I will argue that we should accept that Tacitus saw himself as writing in large part to provide *exempla*, for moral purposes; this was indeed the standard view until about the middle of the twentieth century.⁵ Good *exempla* provide encouragement, and bad ones have a deterrent effect, both for the general reader and, above all, for people who might find themselves used as *exempla* by a judgmental historian. Moreover in Tacitus an *exemplum* is not just a Good Thing or a Bad Thing; it is also something his readers can use in thinking through their own decisions. The characters in Tacitus are notoriously complex, whether they end up on the right or the wrong side of history.⁶ His readers can thus reflect on each case, and extract the appropriate lessons for themselves.

Tacitus' approach to *exempla* is illuminated, and possibly informed, by the use of *exempla* in some of the Stoics, particularly Seneca.⁷ Although many scholars reject the notion that Tacitus is in any sense a Stoic, or even fundamentally sympathetic to Stoics, this view stems in some cases from a failure to recognize how flexible and interactive Stoic moral teaching could be. Stoics could urge you to remember that virtue—living in accordance with nature—was the proper goal in life, but they were remarkably open-minded about what that meant in practice. They knew that people were morally frail and might not automatically do the right thing, and they also knew that it was not always easy to know what the right thing actually was. But Stoics believed they could provide inspiration (and deterrence) to help compensate for natural moral weakness. They could also help you decide on the right course of action, given your particular situation and character. They would use the best teaching tools at their disposal: philosophical arguments and individual precepts, certainly, but also *exempla*.

Tacitus, in my view, is doing much the same thing. The behavior of many Romans had clearly disappointed him. But Rome was not necessarily a lost cause, because people could still be inspired to do what was right, and they could be deterred from doing the opposite. And since the insight necessary for making the right decisions was not easy to come by, especially under the emperors, it was all the more important for them to know what others had done.⁸

Historical writing of this kind would not of itself provide either the courage or the insight that would keep monarchs from turning into tyrants. But it might

4. Woodman 1995 [rpt. 1998].

5. For the early modern period see esp. Salmon 1989; Schellhase 1976. For more recent views see e.g. Furneaux 1968: 27; Klingner 1932; Kornemann 1947: 40.

6. Luce 1986; Pelling 1993.

7. Zimmermann 1889 remains useful, though some of his suggested parallels are unconvincing. See also Abel 1990; Brinkmann 2002.

8. See esp. *Ann.* 4.33.2, discussed in section 6 below.

help. And *exempla* were at least something tangible that a Roman senator could contribute, if he had literary talent, historical interests, and a real appreciation for the lessons of Stoicism.⁹

1. *PRAECIPUUM MUNUS ANNALIUM*

Tacitus' comment about the purpose of history comes as an apology for his subject matter, prompted by a series of senatorial debates: discussion of the *tribunicia potestas* is followed by discussion of provincial rights to asylum, which in turn is followed by the question of what priests should undertake sacrifices for the ailing Livia (*Ann.* 3.56–9; 3.60–63; 3.64). At this point Tacitus breaks off to explain why he has reported on senatorial decisions that the reader might well see as trivial. The discussions, he says, prompted displays either of integrity or obsequiousness, and the historian is obliged to report such things: he should commemorate good behavior and deter its opposite.

Unfortunately, as Woodman has pointed out, there are two ambiguities in the Latin.¹⁰ In the first place, there is no way to tell whether *praecipuum munus annalium* means *the* most important function of annalistic history or *a* most important one.¹¹ More important, the precise function of *quod* is remarkably unclear. Most scholars have taken it simply as “because,” in which case Tacitus is explaining the duties of an annalistic historian:

I chose not to go through [senatorial] opinions unless they were conspicuous for being honest or notably disgraceful, because [*quod*] I think it is the [or “a”] primary function of annals to make sure that virtues are not silenced and that immoral words and deeds should fear posterity and public disgrace.

This interpretation seems easy enough, but there is reason to doubt that the sentence is so straightforward. Tacitus uses very similar language in a discussion of Tiberius, where *quod* is a relative pronoun:

percensuitque cursim numerum legionum et quas provincias tutarentur.
quod mihi quoque exsequendum reor, quae tunc Romana copia in armis,
qui socii reges, quanto sit angustius imperitatum.

Ann. 4.4.3

9. Seneca offers an illuminating parallel, see Roller 2001: 66: “Seneca suggests to his aristocratic readers that, if attentive to his ethical reforms, they stand to reclaim certain privileges and powers traditionally exercised by the aristocracy but recently monopolized by the *princeps*.” See esp. Sen. *Tranq.* 3.4–5 and 4.1–8 on the value of participation in public life, as long as participation is possible.

10. Woodman 1995: 112 [rpt. 1998: 87–89]; briefly Woodman and Martin 1996: 451–56.

11. Luce 1991: 2905n.3 observes that *praecipuum* seems to mean “both that which is special to history and that which takes precedence over other *munera* of history.”

He briefly inventoried the number of legions and the provinces they were guarding. Which I think I too need to review—what were then the Roman forces under arms, who were the allied kings, and how much more restricted was our empire.

As a relative pronoun *quod* here has a dual function: its antecedent is *percensuit* ... *tutarentur*, but it also introduces the subsequent elucidation in *quae* ... *imperitatum*. Many scholars have suggested that *quod* in our passage works in the same way:

I chose not to go through [senatorial] opinions unless they were conspicuous for being honest or notably disgraceful, which [*quod*] is what I regard as the [or “a”] primary function of annals—to make sure that virtues are not silenced and that immoral words and deeds should be afraid of posterity and public disgrace.

As my translation tries to emphasize, *quod*, as a relative pronoun, looks back to the first part of the sentence (*Exsequi* ... *dedecore*), and also looks forward to its conclusion (*reor* ... *ne virtutes sileantur*).

Woodman argues that the passage about Tiberius is not really a close parallel, on the grounds that the dual function of *quod* is made easier there by the fact that the word it goes with, *exsequendum*, means much the same thing as *percensuit*. He concludes that in *Annals* 3.65 *quod* does indeed introduce a relative clause, but suggests that it is entirely retrospective: the *praecipuum munus annalium* has nothing to do with remembering virtue and censuring evil deeds, but refers only to the recording of opinions uttered in the Senate. Woodman translates the passage thus:

It has not been my practice to go through senatorial *sententiae* in detail except those conspicuous for honour or notable shame (which I reckon to be a very great responsibility of annals), lest virtues be silenced and so that crooked words and deeds should, in the light of posterity and infamy, attract dread.¹²

This is no doubt a possible reading of the Latin, and Woodman is certainly right that Tacitus' remark is prompted by his interest in senatorial deliberations. But Woodman is not drawn to this more restrictive reading by the ambiguities of the Latin alone; he accepts that it is “perhaps not impossible” that *quod* is a relative pronoun with a dual function.¹³ His real objection is a much more general one. Accepting Luce's observation that the only close parallels to Tacitus' statement (as traditionally understood) are in Diodorus, Woodman wonders whether it is likely “that Rome's greatest historian would have defined ‘history's highest

12. Woodman 1995: 116 [rpt. 1998: 91–92].

13. Woodman 1995: 112 [rpt. 1998: 88] argues from the difficulty of understanding a dual function for “this” in *English*.

function' in terms which are perceived by scholars to be emphatic but which are so unconventional that they cannot be paralleled except in a relatively minor Greek historian."¹⁴

But the comments of Diodorus, like those of Tacitus, are part of a richer tradition than Woodman allows. It is no coincidence, in my view, that Diodorus' introduction is clearly influenced by Stoic ideas about the brotherhood of man and divine providence.¹⁵ The Stoics had particular uses for historical *exempla*, and their thoughts on the subject show that Tacitus' interest in praise and condemnation had respectable and illuminating precedents.

2. STOICS AND *EXEMPLA*

The Greeks and Romans regularly invoked individuals from both history and literature to illustrate and explore their arguments.¹⁶ The practice is advocated in rhetorical textbooks from Aristotle on, but *exempla* (παράδειγματα) had appeared as early as Homer, and continued to be a regular feature of Greek and Roman narrative technique.¹⁷ The Romans, a people perhaps unusually preoccupied with their ancestors, found this literary tradition particularly congenial.¹⁸ And one of the reasons history was attractive was that it was such a good source of *exempla*: one rhetorical handbook tells us that history was "philosophy from examples."¹⁹

The Roman Stoics found *exempla* extremely useful in their fight against moral weakness; as Seneca says, the philosophical journey is long if you rely on basic principles, but shorter and easier if you use *exempla* (Sen. *EM.* 6.5: *longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla*). This feature of their thinking is ignored in much modern work on Stoicism, but Martha Nussbaum has called attention to the importance that the education of others had for the Stoics, and to the fact that *exempla* were among their most important tools.²⁰ The Stoics were certainly not alone in this: Seneca explicitly says that he learned about the

14. Woodman 1995: 116 [rpt. 1998: 91].

15. See below, section 3.

16. Alewell 1912; Kornhardt 1936; Lumpe 1966; for *exempla* in medieval and early modern literature see Bremond, LeGoff, and Schmitt 1982; Lyons 1989.

17. Arist. *Rhet.* 1356a; 1393ab. For the rhetorical writers see esp. Martin 1974: 119–24; Price 1975. For Homer see Willcock 2001.

18. Mayer 1991: 145–47; Hölkeskamp 1996; Roller 2004; Walter 2004: esp. 51–62.

19. ps.-Dion. Hal. *Ars Rhet.* 11.2: ἱστορία φιλοσοφία ἐστὶν ἐκ παραδειγμάτων; for the text, Usener and Radermacher 1965: 376. See also Cic. *Or.* 2.36: *Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis* ("History, witness of the past, light of truth, life of memory, teacher of life, herald of antiquity"), with Koselleck 1967. On *exempla* in ancient historians see also Woodman 1977: 30–45; Fornara 1983: 10–20; Wiedemann 2000; Gärtner 2001.

20. Nussbaum 1994: 316–41; see also Davidson 1907: 84–86; Fiore 1986: 92–97; Rutherford 1989: 26–28; Inwood 2005: 341–44; Reydams-Schils 2005: 18–24. For the early modern period see Salmon 1989.

importance of role models from Epicurus.²¹ But there is some evidence to suggest that the Stoics were particularly associated with *exempla*.²² Plutarch, for example, apparently sees *exempla* (perhaps historical ones) as fundamental to the teaching of his Stoic opponents: οὐδ' ἂν ἐζήλουν ἔργα καὶ πράξεις καὶ λόγους καὶ βίους ἐνίων εἰ πάντας ὡσαύτως πνιγομένους ὑπὸ τῆς ἀφροσύνης καὶ μοχθηρίας ἐώρων (Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1063b: “they would not be emulating the deeds and actions and words and lives of some men, if in their view all men were swamped in the same way by stupidity and baseness”).²³ And the founders of the school were clearly aware that *exempla* could be useful. Zeno was interested enough to provide a definition.²⁴ And Chrysippus used the case of Medea to explore the potential conflict between reason and the passions, apparently at great length.²⁵ He was also interested in the moral deterrence of *paradeigmata*: he explains that in Hesiod Zeus punishes the wicked ὅπως τῶν πονηρῶν κολαζομένων οἱ λοιποὶ παραδείγμασι τούτοις χρώμενοι ἦττον ἐπιχειρῶσι τοιοῦτόν τι ποιεῖν (Plut. *Stoic. Repugn.* 1040c = SVF. 2.1175: “so that when the wicked are punished, the rest will employ them as examples, and thus they will try less often to do that sort of thing”).

It remains unclear whether the use of historical *exempla* that features so prominently in Cicero and Seneca owes much to Stoic doctrine. Roland Mayer has argued that for Seneca the Roman literary tradition was far more important than his Stoicism.²⁶ Certainly many of the comments about *exempla* in Stoic writers reflect the teachings of rhetorical handbooks, or are perhaps merely common sense. Moreover the relationship between what is “Roman” and what is “Stoic” is complicated and sometimes impossible to pin down,²⁷ and Seneca’s ideas can be elusive in much the same way.²⁸ But the important point is that, whatever their

21. Sen. *EM.* 11.9, discussed in section 2.1 below.

22. Nussbaum 1994: 339 makes a strong claim indeed: “In Stoic teaching narratives and examples will play a central role. There is no moral philosophy in the Western tradition in which this is more evident; it is a constant practice, and it is also a part of the official theory.” The only evidence she cites for “official theory” is Cic. *Tusc.* 3.79, which does not seem to me to prove the point.

23. See also Plut. *Stoic. Repugn.* 1038f. = SVF 3.212, where Chrysippus perhaps suggests that examples of virtuous behavior are central to arguments about morality.

24. Anon. on Rhetoric, Spengel *Rhet. Gr.* 1.447, line 11 = SVF 1.84: ὡς δὲ Ζήνων· παράδειγμά ἐστι γενομένου πράγματος ἀπομνημόνευσις εἰς ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ νῦν ζητουμένου (“According to Zeno *paradeigma* is a reminiscence of something that happened, to show similarity with the thing now under consideration.”) Dilts and Kennedy 1997: 45 suggest that this is the rhetorical writer Zeno of Athens rather than Zeno of Citium.

25. SVF 2.347; 2.906 [3-4]; D.L. 7.180. See also Gill 1983 and 1996: 158–62.

26. Mayer 1991; also Castagna 1991; Heikkinen 1997. For historical *exempla* in Cicero see Rambaud 1953: 25–36; Rawson 1972; Dörrie 1978.

27. Brunt 1975: 7 compares the influence of Christianity “on men ignorant or careless of the nicer points of systematic theology.” Roller 2001 offers a nuanced exploration of the relationship between the ideas of the Roman Stoics and those of Roman society more generally.

28. On Seneca’s Stoic “orthodoxy” see Rist 1989; Cooper 2004: 309–34; Inwood 2005. Seneca certainly *thought* of himself as a Stoic; see Sen. *Const. Sap.* 2.1; *Otio* 3.1; *NQ.* 7.22.1.

sources of inspiration, the Roman Stoics clearly regarded *exempla* as more than mere decorations or illustrations.²⁹ They could be flexible and powerful elements in moral instruction.

The Stoics apparently never produced a systematic discussion of *exempla*, and what follows is not intended to fill that void; I want instead merely to point out six aspects of *exempla* that were important both to the Stoics and to Tacitus. First, the Stoics saw that *exempla* could provide moral inspiration as effectively as doctrinal arguments or moral precepts. Second, they realized that people did not have to be perfect, or even generally admirable, to offer inspiration; barbarians, people of low social standing, and people who had not always behaved well could be even more inspiring than the more obvious role models. Third, the Stoics thought that the deterrence offered by bad behavior could be just as useful as *exempla* that inspired emulation. Fourth, they were particularly interested in how people faced death, and went out of their way to collect *exempla* of good and bad deaths. Fifth, the Stoics found *exempla* to be useful vehicles for moral reflection; *exempla* were, as people say nowadays, “good to think with.” Stoics also believed, finally, that they could help others by becoming *exempla* themselves.

2.1 EXEMPLA VIRTUTIS

One antidote for moral weakness, of course, is other people. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius took pains to identify and think about role models, starting with people they actually knew: even when not physically present, such people offered both inspiration and a way to test one’s values and choices. Marcus makes the point at the beginning of his *Meditations*, listing people to whom he was indebted for moral instruction. Marcus never identifies these people as *paradeigmata*, and he talks about what he learned from the Gods as well as his friends and relatives. But his discussions of the people he admired, particularly his father-by-adoption and predecessor, are eloquent testimony to the power that real-life *exempla* can have.³⁰ And Seneca provides a more theoretical discussion of the same principle: he believes, following Epicurus, that everyone needs at least one person to defer to, morally, as a check on innate weaknesses, since fear is a particularly good incitement to virtue.³¹ And such a role model does not have to be physically present to have such an impact: *O felicem illum, qui non praesens*

29. For *exempla* purely for entertainment value see ps.-Menander 2.4 (389 Spengel), in Russell and Wilson 1981; also *Auct. ad Herenn.* 2.29.46; Quint. 5.11.5.

30. *M. Ant.* 1.1–17; Rutherford 1989: 55–59.

31. Sen. *EM.* 11.9: *Hoc, mi Lucili, Epicurus praecepit. Custodem nobis et paedagogum dedit, ne immerito. Magna pars peccatorum tollitur, si peccaturis testis adsistit. Aliquem habeat animus, quem vereatur, cuius auctoritate etiam secretum suum sanctius faciat* (“This, my dear Lucilius, is what Epicurus recommends. He has given us a guardian and a teacher, and not without good reason: a large portion of errors is removed if there is a witness when someone is about to err. The mind should have someone to fear, by whose authority he can make even his inmost sanctuary more holy”). See also *Sen. EM.* 11.8; 25.5–6; Musonius 61H. On the whole topic see Hadot 1969: 171–74.

tantum, sed etiam cogitatus emendat! (Sen. *EM.* 11.9: “How fortunate is the person who makes corrections not just when present, but even when in someone’s thoughts!”).³²

The Stoics gave pride of place to role models who were still living, since they were present in everyday interactions or easy to call to mind.³³ But *exempla* in books still had value. Some might be found in literature; Seneca suggests that the most important thing about poetry was that it offered *exempla* such as Ulysses, whose devotion to home and country could be an inspiration to us all.³⁴ But history was a still richer source of *exempla virtutis*, which had more impact because they were more immediate.³⁵ Some of Seneca’s historical role models come from Greek history, such as Leonidas and his Spartans.³⁶ And Seneca also draws on the biographical and doxographical traditions that were such an important part of Greek philosophical teaching; Socrates is Seneca’s most important role model, but later philosophers are cited as well, including Epicurus, Diogenes, and prominent Stoics.³⁷ But most of Seneca’s models of virtue are Roman. Many of them are traditional ones, familiar from Roman history and rhetoric, but there are also plenty of figures from the recent past.³⁸ These include military and political figures, but Cato Uticensis and Demetrius the Cynic embody a kind of fusion of traditional history and philosophical biography.³⁹

Seneca is quite explicit about the value of historical *exempla*, Roman and non-Roman alike. They can, he tells Lucilius, provide comfort, encouragement, and inspiration, and they are easy to find, since there are so many of them; he points particularly to Rutilius Rufus, Metellus Numidicus, Mucius Scaevola, and Cato (Sen. *EM.* 24.4–8). Seneca recognizes that these *exempla* might seem hackneyed (Sen. *EM.* 24.6). But their aggregate effect, he thinks, can make Lucilius more resolute, strengthening a nature which is human, and therefore weak: *Non in hoc exempla nunc congero, ut ingenium exerceam, sed ut te adversus id, quod maxime terribile videtur, exhorter* (Sen. *EM.* 24.9: “I don’t pile up these *exempla* as an intellectual exercise, but to encourage you in your struggle against the thing that seems so terrible to you”).

32. See also Sen. *EM.* 25.7; *Otio* 1.1.

33. Sen. *EM.* 6.5–6.

34. Sen. *EM.* 88.7. For Stoicism and poetry see de Lacy 1948; Nussbaum 1993.

35. This point is made explicitly at Quint. 5.11.17. In general see Litchfield 1914.

36. Sen. *EM.* 82.21–23. Much more common are references to the Persian kings as *mala exempla*, on which see below; Sen. *EM.* 86.1; *Ben.* 6.31; 7.3.1; *Brev.* 17.1; *Ira* 3.16.4. See Bogun 1968.

37. For the Stoics see e.g. Sen. *EM.* 6.6; 104.22; *Ben.* 7.8.2; on the doxographical tradition see Mejer 1978.

38. See esp. Mayer 1991.

39. For Cato see Griffin 1992: 182–94; Pecchiura 1965: 59–71. For Demetrius see Griffin 1992: 111–12; Gill 2003: 48.

2.2 UNEXPECTED EXEMPLA VIRTUTIS

Seneca sometimes discusses exemplary actions performed by people in whom heroism is somewhat surprising. There is nothing particularly Stoic about this interest; Quintilian (5.11.10) tells us that, since women are usually less courageous than men, the woman who killed Pyrrhus is more inspiring than Horatius and Torquatus, and Lucretia is more inspiring than Cato and Scipio. But Seneca extends the principle in two ways.

First, he invokes captive barbarians and slaves, in a kind of ethnic and social *a fortiori* argument: if such people can make courageous choices, he and his friends should be able to do so as well. Seneca cites a story of Claudius Quadrigarius about two slaves who saved their mistress from Spartacus' army, and claims that it was their humble status that made their mistress, who in gratitude gave them their freedom, into a significant *exemplum* (Sen. *Ben.* 3.23.2–4). He also tells Lucilius about a German prisoner and a gladiator, who killed themselves (with great difficulty) rather than continue lives they did not value. His point is that one does not have to be a Cato to have the correct view of life and death, and indeed that such examples are all the more powerful, since when such low characters are not afraid of death we are prompted to ask more of ourselves (Sen. *EM.* 70.19–23).⁴⁰

The same logic, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to Seneca's use of Metellus Scipio. This Scipio, the father-in-law of Pompey, was spectacularly aristocratic by birth and adoption, but (according to Seneca) he was someone who for most of his life had been fairly cowardly. Faced with capture by Caesar's forces, however, he fell on his sword, after delivering a memorable one-liner: "*imperator,*" *inquit,* "*se bene habet*" (Sen. *EM.* 24.9: "The general," he said, "is doing well"). Heroism in such an unlikely character is all the more inspirational; in death, says Seneca, this Scipio actually surpassed the courage of his famous ancestors.⁴¹

2.3 MALA EXEMPLA

The Stoics also had their uses for examples of what to avoid.⁴² Here again they were not alone: Horace famously says that his father pointed to various people as illustrations of what not to become (Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.103–129). But the Stoics' interest in the moral improvement of others meant that they were interested in anything that could make a moral statement, and stories of bad behavior could certainly do that. As with *exempla* for inspiration, *mala exempla* could be found in literature as well as real life. Epictetus suggests that the real point of tragedies

40. Note esp. *EM.* 70.22: *Plus enim a se quisque exiget, si viderit hanc rem etiam a contemptissimis posse contemni* ("For a person will make greater demands on himself, if he sees that such a thing [i.e. death] can be despised by the lowest of the low"). See also *Ben.* 3.19.2–3.

41. See Mayer 1991: 154–55.

42. Sen. *Ira* 3.22.1: *exempla, quae vites*. The rhetorical writers can speak of arguments from opposites, e.g. *Rhet. ad Alex.* 7 1429b–1430a.

is that they offer examples of people who come to grief because they are too concerned with worldly things (Epict. 1.4.25–26), and it has been suggested that Seneca wrote his tragedies for much the same purpose.⁴³ But there were also plenty of *mala exempla* to be found in history, Roman as well as foreign.⁴⁴ The recent past had a lot to offer.⁴⁵ Above all there was the emperor Gaius, whom Seneca invokes as an archetype for arrogance, cruelty, extravagance, insanity, and a vicious sense of humor.⁴⁶

Seneca can be quite explicit about the moral value of *mala exempla* from history. He concludes an account of the weird ways in which Gaius coped with the death of his sister by telling his readers that they should be very different (Sen. *Cons. Pol.* 17.4–6). Seneca even suggests that Gaius was intended by Nature as an *exemplum* (though he does not use the word), to show the world just how bad the combination of vices and good fortune could be (Sen. *Cons. Helv.* 10.4). In day-to-day life it was presumably a little tactless to try to improve one's friends by invoking *exempla* of evil, and *exempla* of good behavior are certainly more common in Seneca; but *mala exempla* clearly had their uses.

The moral lessons could be somewhat subtle ones. Seneca repeats Herodotus' story of the drunken Cambyses, who used the son of Prexaspes for target practice, to condemn and explore the complicity of the father (Sen. *Ira* 3.14–15). In theory Seneca's point is that it is possible to control one's anger even in the most difficult circumstances (Sen. *Ira* 3.14.4). But his most important point is that the acquiescence of Prexaspes was worse than the cruelty of Cambyses. Some might say that it would have been both futile and fatal if Prexaspes had shown his anger (Sen. *Ira* 3.14.5–6). But Seneca, who of course has a personal interest in relations with a tyrant, doesn't believe that for a minute: Prexaspes should have protested, and invited Cambyses to shoot him as well (Sen. *Ira* 3.14.3).

2.4 EXEMPLA AND DEATH

If there is one thing the Roman Stoics were known for, it was their willingness, when appropriate, to die. Even more important, for our purposes, was their willingness to talk about the subject, not only to explore the moral complexities of suicide, but also to counter the normal human failing of being afraid of it. John Rist has argued that Seneca was unusual among Stoics in being morbidly interested in suicide, which for Seneca was the ultimate mechanism for defending

43. See the useful survey of the debate by Rosenmeyer 1989: 14–36.

44. Sen. *Ira* 3.18.1: *Utinam ista saevitia intra peregrina exempla mansisset nec in Romanos mores cum aliis adventiciis vitiis etiam suppliciorum irarumque barbaria transisset!* (“Would that these savageries had remained among the barbarian *exempla* and that the barbarity of punishments and angers had not been transferred to Roman customs along with the other alien vices!”). Seneca goes on to give examples.

45. Sen. *Ira* 3.18.3: *Quid antiqua perscrutor?* (“Why do I scrutinize the past?”).

46. Sen. *Ira* 1.20.8; 2.33.3–4; 3.18.3–4; 3.21.5; *Brev.* 18.5–6; *Pol. Cons.* 17.4–6; *Helv. Cons.* 10.4; *Ben.* 2.12; 2.21.5; 4.31.2; 7.11. For Gaius' “witty” insults see *Const. Sap.* 18.

personal virtue.⁴⁷ But while this preoccupation may point to something distinctive and rather sad about Seneca's psychological makeup, it was also part of a more general Stoic concern with conquering the fear of death. Those who faced death well had something important to teach the rest of us.⁴⁸

For the Stoics life was at best a preferred indifferent, and it followed that death was always available as an escape from evil.⁴⁹ But Seneca also knew that this logic could be easier to accept intellectually than emotionally, and he worked hard to persuade his readers of what in theory they already knew. Thus the *De Providentia* ends with a spectacular tirade in which "God" scolds anyone who complains about life's unfairness, on the grounds that He has made death available to anyone who wants it (Sen. *Prov.* 6.7). On top of that, "God" continues, death is quick. So there is no reason to be afraid of it: "*Ecquid erubescitis? Quod tam cito fit, timetis diu!*" (Sen. *Prov.* 6.9: "'Why aren't you ashamed of yourselves? You spend so much time being afraid of something that happens so quickly!'").

Because people tended instinctively to resist this view of death, Seneca often resorted to historical *exempla*. It is no accident that so many of his historical figures displayed their virtues in the manner of their deaths rather than in their lives. Socrates and Cato are of course the most obvious martyr figures in Seneca's array of *exempla virtutis*, and we hear far more about their deaths than about their teaching or their politics. But Seneca has plenty of other examples of people whose deaths have much to teach us, some of whom we have encountered already. And Seneca also tells us about people who wrongly value life too highly; his solution to the moral dilemma of Prexaspes, or anyone in an analogous position, is suicide: *Quaeris quod sit ad libertatem iter? Quaelibet in corpore tuo vena!* (Sen. *Ira* 3.15.4: "Do you want to know the road to freedom? Any vein in your body!").

The reign of Nero saw an outbreak of books about the deaths of famous people.⁵⁰ Their authors were moved partly by connections with the victims and partly by political opposition to the regime, but it is also possible that these authors, like Seneca, had philosophical reasons for their interest in *exempla* of death. Whatever the ultimate reason for Seneca's interest in death, at least, he was certainly not alone.⁵¹

2.5 THINKING WITH EXEMPLA

The Stoics also found *exempla* to be powerful tools for thinking about practical ethics. Almost by definition *exempla* can only be useful after pondering the lessons

47. Rist 1969: ch. 13; Rist 1989: esp. 2004–2006.

48. For Seneca's discussions of death see esp. Inwood 2005: 305–12.

49. Schofield 2003: 239. For early Stoic statements about reason and death see SVF 3. nos. 757–68.

50. Pliny, *Ep.* 1.17.3; 5.5.5; Ronconi 1940; MacMullen 1966: 70–93.

51. See M. Ant. 1.14 where Marcus shows that he is grateful he learned about five men who died in resisting tyranny: Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, Cato and Brutus, and (probably) Dio of Syracuse. For the identification of Dio see Rutherford 1989: 64n.51.

learned, and their relevance to our own situation.⁵² But the Stoics believed that everyone had a particular role to play in the great scheme of things, and since everyone had to decide what precisely that role was, applying the lessons of particular *exempla* inevitably involved distilling different moral lessons from different stories.⁵³ Thus for Seneca *exempla* did more than provoke emulation or revulsion; they also had a certain complexity, to provide useful topics for exploration by a wide range of readers.⁵⁴

The Stoic who came closest to exploring this issue seems to have been Posidonius, who laid particular emphasis on the fallibility of people and their improvement. The evidence is preserved by Seneca, who in *Epistles* 94 and 95 first argues for the primacy of doctrine in moral teaching, and then makes the case for the importance of individual moral rules (*praecepta*); these, he says, are often in daily life more useful.⁵⁵ Posidonius thought that turning people towards philosophy could require not only abstract principles but also more practical techniques, such as persuasion, consolation and exhortation, and the investigation of causes. It was also helpful to provide concrete, if invented, examples of each virtue:

Ait utilem futuram et descriptionem cuiusque virtutis; hanc Posidonius ethologian vocat, quidam characterismon appellant, signa cuiusque virtutis ac vitii et notas reddentem, quibus inter se similia discriminentur.

Sen. *EM.* 95.65

He says that the depiction of each virtue will also be useful; Posidonius calls this “ethology,” while others call it “characterization”: it renders the signs and marks of each virtue and each vice, by which things that are similar to one another may be distinguished.

Seneca goes on to explain that an example (here *exemplar*) can have much the same effect as a precept.

Haec res eandem vim habet quam praecipere. Nam qui praecipit, dicit: “illa facies, si voles temperans esse.” Qui describit, ait: “temperans est, qui illa facit, qui illis abstinet.” Quaeris, quid intersit? Alter praecepta virtutis dat, alter exemplar. Descriptiones has et, ut publicanorum utar verbo, iconismos ex usu esse confiteor; proponamus laudanda, inveniatur imitator. Putas utile dari tibi argumenta, per quae intellegas nobilem equum, ne fallaris empturus, ne operam perdas in ignavo? Quanto hoc

52. See esp. the extended discussion of Regulus at Cic. *Off.* 3.99–115.

53. The point is encapsulated in the “four persona theory” of Panaetius: Gill 1988.

54. Habinek 2000: 265: “As Seneca’s own discursive practice makes clear, an *exemplum* did not have to be exclusively good or exclusively bad. What was required was a vividness that made the *exemplum* memorable and a narrative complexity that made it potentially applicable to a variety of situations and issues.” The most detailed exploration of this aspect of Stoicism known to me is Graver 1996.

55. See esp. Bellincioni 1979; Kidd 1988: 646–51.

utilius est, excellentis animi notas nosse, quas ex alio in se transferre permittitur.

Sen. *EM.* 95.66–67

This has much the same effect as giving precepts. For the person who gives precepts says “This is what to do if you want to be temperate.” But the person who gives descriptions says “The temperate person is one who does the these things, and refrains from doing those.” You ask what the difference is? The first gives instructions about virtue, the second gives an *exemplar*. I confess that these descriptions and “iconisms” (if I may use the word of a tax man) are useful: if we put forth things that are praiseworthy someone will be found to imitate them. You know how useful it is to be given indications of how to recognize a noble steed, so that you won’t make a mistake when trying to buy one, and won’t waste your time with a bad horse: it is even more useful to recognize the marks of an excellent spirit, which you can appropriate for yourself.

Specific examples, in other words, serve two purposes. They clearly have a proreptic function, since Seneca assumes that the outward signs of a virtuous nature will automatically inspire us to emulate them. But they also help with the essential ethical analysis: we have to identify for ourselves the features that reflect the spirit to be emulated.

So far Seneca has been talking about *exemplar*, not *exemplum*. The word *exemplar* was in theory reserved for an imaginary creation, not a real example drawn from history or everyday life, but in practice this distinction could be lost.⁵⁶ He goes on to show how Vergil’s description of a spirited horse could be used to identify the signs of a great man, and would be ideal for a portrayal of Cato.⁵⁷ The discussion illustrates just how interactive the use of examples could be: Vergil’s description of the horse provides only talking points, and it is up to the reader to decide which parts of the description apply directly (and why), and which require modification.

Seneca then turns to historical *exempla*, though he does not use that word (Sen. *EM.* 95.72). It is not enough, he says, to describe the characteristics of good men in the abstract; it is also useful to provide concrete illustrations: Cato died for freedom, Laelius had wisdom, the elder Cato had worthy deeds, and Aelius Tubero used only the simplest furniture and utensils. Seneca does not offer much guidance on how these *exempla* should be applied to our own lives (we get an outburst of moral indignation instead), but presumably we can figure it out. As with Vergil’s horse, Seneca does not expect us to apply the lessons of these *exempla* directly: none of us is a Cato, a Laelius or a Tubero, and the signs of their excellence can only inspire us, and give us something to think about.

56. Habinek 1987:195.

57. Sen. *EM.* 95.68–71, citing Verg. *Georg.* 3.75–81 and 83–85.

2.6 BECOMING *EXEMPLA*

In the case of *exempla virtutis*, as we have seen, the Stoics valued quantity. They realized, too, that people did not need to be perfect, or even generally admirable, to provide *exempla* that would be useful to others. It is therefore not surprising that their interest in role models should have extended to their own potential.⁵⁸

Guardians and teachers had to come from somewhere, and since no one alive was a perfect *sapiens*, imperfect aspirants would have to do what they could.⁵⁹ After invoking the courage of Mucius Scaevola, Regulus, Socrates, Rutilius, and Cato, and the abstemiousness of Fabricius, Tubero and Sextius, Seneca goes on to suggest that he and Lucilius can also be *exempla*:

Nos quoque aliquid et ipsi faciamus animose; simus inter exempla. Quare defecimus? Quare desperamus? Quidquid fieri potuit, potest, nos modo purgemus animum sequamurque naturam, a qua aberranti cupiendum timendumque est et fortuitis serviendum. Licet reverti in viam, licet in integrum restitui; restituiamur, ut possimus dolores, quocumque modo corpus invaserint, perferre et fortunae dicere: “cum viro tibi negotium est; quaere, quem vincas.”

Sen. *EM.* 98.13–14

We too should ourselves do something spirited: we should be among the *exempla*. Why have we fallen short? Why do we give up? Whatever could happen *can* happen, if only we cleanse our mind and follow nature; the one who strays from nature must have desires, and fears, and must be subject to chance events. It is possible to return to the true path, it is possible to be made whole; let us become whole, so that we can endure pain, however it attacks our body, and say to fortune: “You have a man to deal with; seek someone you can conquer.”

Here the emphasis is on self-improvement; joining the historical *exempla* is more a sign of moral progress than something offered to others. But in the *de Tranquillitate Animi* Seneca’s interlocutor Serenus shows that such moral progress can indeed benefit society more generally. Serenus begins with a frank discussion of his own vices, but that does not stop him from wanting to show others what he has learned:

Sed ubi lectio fortior erexit animum et aculeos subdiderunt exempla nobilia, prosilire libet in forum, commodare alteri vocem, alteri operam, etiam si nihil profuturam, tamen conaturam prodesse, alicuius coercere in foro superbiam male secundis rebus elati.

Sen. *Tranq.* 1.12

58. See esp. Edwards 1997; Inwood 2005: 341–45.

59. On the scarcity of Stoic wise men see Donini and Inwood 1999: 717–23.

But when a heroic reading has stimulated my mind and noble *exempla* have applied the spurs, I want to rush into the forum, and lend my voice to one man, and my assistance to another (even if it will not help, the attempt is still valuable), and I want to restrain the pride of another man in the forum who is wrongly exalted by his successes.

The Stoics were presumably not alone in thinking that even imperfect people have much to offer each other. But it is significant, for our purposes at least, that they were so clearly aware of the connection between *exempla* from the past and their own potential as role models in the present, and for the future.

3. STOIC HISTORY

While the Stoic uses of historical *exempla* are reasonably clear, it is more difficult to establish whether they actually wrote histories to provide more of them. The Stoics were certainly not actively hostile to the writing of history, as has sometimes been said.⁶⁰ Seneca's liberal use of historical *exempla* shows that he respected the subject, as perhaps does the fact that he planned to publish his father's history of the civil war.⁶¹ Seneca does say that historical details are unimportant compared with philosophical truths, and that what has been done in the past matters less than what ought to be done.⁶² But of course that is no contradiction: to see philosophy as paramount does not eliminate history as a useful resource.

Three Stoics are known to have been historians. Posidonius wrote a number of historical works, including a continuation of Polybius.⁶³ Strabo, who at a number of places refers to his adherence to Stoicism, wrote another continuation of Polybius and perhaps a separate collection of historical essays.⁶⁴ And Arrian, who recorded the lectures and doctrines of Epictetus, wrote a personal memoir, regional histories, an account of events after the death of Alexander, and his famous history of Alexander's campaigns.⁶⁵ We are told explicitly that the histories of Strabo and Posidonius had philosophical purposes: Strabo tells us that he regarded his

60. Pohlenz 1964: 47. The Stoic attitude to history has not received much attention, but see Verbeke 1964; Brunt 1977: 32–35; Armisen-Marchetti 1995.

61. Fragment XV Haase = Peter 1914: 2.98. See Griffin 1992: 33. According to Lactantius *DI*. 7.15.14, "Seneca" (the Elder or the Younger) imagined Roman history from Romulus to Augustus as a series of stages parallel to those of human life.

62. Sen. *Brev.* 13.8–9; Sen. *NQ* pr. 3.5–7.

63. Edelstein and Kidd 1989: 77–90; 220–55; see also Kidd 1988 and 1999; von Fritz 1977; Malitz 1983.

64. The number of Strabo's historical works is uncertain. Dueck 2000: 70 revives the argument that the *Hypomnemata* and "Events after Polybius" were two separate works; see Str. 11.9.3. For Strabo's Stoicism, which has been doubted, see Aujac 1983; Dueck 2000: 62–69.

65. For the *Anabasis* see the edition of Brunt 1976. The fragments of the other historical works are collected in Roos 2002, II.197–290; 323–24, and more conservatively in *FGrHist*. II B no. 156; see esp. Stadter 1980: 133–63.

histories, like his *Geography*, as useful for personal ethics and political philosophy (Str. 1.1.22–23). And Posidonius, according to Athenaeus, used his history to write about the many practices and customs relevant to his philosophy (Fr. 67 Edelstein-Kidd = Ath. 4.151e.).

It makes sense that Stoics would have seen history as useful for philosophy; if they could pursue astronomy and physics to help them understand the workings of Providence, they will surely have seen a similar value in seeing how human events unfolded. And the Stoics' emphasis on the common humanity of all people may also have given them a special incentive to value foreigners, and thus the whole sweep of human history, as a source of *exempla*.⁶⁶ The logic is carefully explained in the preface of Diodorus, in a passage that certainly reflects Stoic ideas, and may in part be a borrowing from Posidonius himself.⁶⁷ According to Diodorus, the authors of universal history, in bringing the different races into a unity appropriate to their common humanity, benefit mankind by providing a unified account of past events and a single repository of them (D.S. 1.1.3). And the reason this matters is that *paradeigmata* are so useful: καλὸν γὰρ τὸ δύνασθαι τοῖς τῶν ἄλλων ἀγνοήμασι πρὸς διόρθωσιν χρῆσθαι παραδείγμασι (D.S. 1.1.4: “for it is good to be able to use the mistakes of others as examples in making corrections”). The more *exempla* a historian can provide, apparently, the better.

It must be admitted that the histories actually produced by Stoics are not as distinctive as we might have expected. The surviving fragments of Posidonius' history do offer plenty of examples of behavior that ought to be avoided; because they are preserved by Athenaeus most such incidents have to do with unfortunate dining customs, though we do also learn about a fast-talking philosopher.⁶⁸ But apparently Posidonius did not explicitly identify characters or events as *exempla*, and his characters seem to have been utterly uncomplicated. We might be deterred from becoming gluttons or conniving hypocrites, but we get little help with more complicated moral questions.

The histories of Strabo are of course lost to us. His *Geography* certainly does contain *exempla* of various kinds; customs and constitutions, even when obsolete, are said to be worth knowing because they can offer inspiration or deterrence (Str. 2.5.17 end). But if Strabo wrote about his world in order to increase the supply of *exempla* he certainly does not make that clear, nor does he seem particularly interested in moral issues.

The Stoic who writes history with a more explicit focus on the moral value of historical *exempla* is Arrian, in his account of Alexander. This may seem an odd claim, since most of the *Anabasis* is a straightforward narrative of Alexander's

66. For the Stoic interest in geography see Aujac 1983: 19–23; Clarke 1999: 29; more generally Baldry 1965.

67. Theiler 1982 prints D.S. 1.3 as a fragment 80 of Posidonius. Sacks 1990: 64 argues that the Stoic ideas here are in Diodorus' own words; for a survey of views see Theiler 1982: vol. II, 84–86 and Sacks 1990: 10–11.

68. Fragment 253 Edelstein-Kidd = Athen. 5.211d–215b.

campaigns, with little obvious interest in either the morality of world conquest or in the people who made it possible.⁶⁹ But the central figure of the *Anabasis* is of course one of the most famous historical *exempla* of them all, and one not lacking in moral complexity. Arrian has no doubt about the greatness of Alexander's achievements, and his sober historical narrative lays out the evidence.⁷⁰ But it is surely no accident that Alexander's achievements are set against some significant moral failings, especially the murder of Bessus.⁷¹ The moral problem of Alexander's career is underscored in a long authorial digression, placed for emphasis squarely at the center of the work:

καὶ ἐγὼ οὐτε τὴν ἄγαν ταύτην τιμωρίαν Βήσσου ἐπαινῶ, ἀλλὰ βαρβαρικὴν εἶναι τίθεμαι τῶν ἀκρωτηρίων τὴν λώβην καὶ ὑπαχθῆναι Ἀλέξανδρον ξύμφημι ἐς ζῆλον τοῦ Μηδικοῦ τε καὶ Περσικοῦ πλοῦτου καὶ τῆς κατὰ τοὺς βαρβάρους βασιλέας οὐκ ἴσης ἐς τοὺς ὑπηκόους ξυνδιαιτήσεως, ἐσθῆτά τε ὅτι Μηδικὴν ἀντὶ τῆς Μακεδονικῆς τε καὶ πατρίου Ἡρακλείδης ὦν μετέλαβεν, οὐδαμῆ ἐπαινῶ, καὶ τὴν κίταριν τὴν Περσικὴν τῶν νενικημένων ἀντὶ ὧν αὐτὸς ὁ νικῶν πάσαι ἐφόρει ἀμεῖψαι οὐκ ἐπηδέσθη, οὐδὲν τούτων ἐπαινῶ, ἀλλ' εἶπερ τι ἄλλο, καὶ τὰ Ἀλεξάνδρου μεγάλα πράγματα ἐς τεκμηρίωσιν τίθεμαι ὡς οὐτε τὸ σῶμα ὅτω εἴη καρτερόν, οὐτε ὅστις γένει ἐπιφανῆς, οὐτε κατὰ πόλεμον εἰ δὴ τις διευτυχοίη ἔτι μᾶλλον ἢ Ἀλέξανδρος, οὐδὲ εἰ τὴν Λιβύην τις πρὸς τῇ Ἀσίᾳ, καθάπερ οὖν ἐπενόει ἐκεῖνος, ἐκπεριπλεύσας κατάσχοι, οὐδὲ εἰ τὴν Εὐρώπην ἐπὶ τῇ Ἀσίᾳ τε καὶ Λιβύῃ τρίτην, τούτων πάντων οὐδὲν τι ὄφελος ἐς εὐδαιμονίαν ἀνθρώπου, εἰ μὴ σωφρονεῖν ἐν ταύτῳ ὑπάρχοι τούτῳ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τῷ τὰ μεγάλα, ὡς δοκεῖ, πράγματα πράξαντι.

An. 4.7.4–5

For my part, I do not approve of this excessive punishment of Bessus; I regard the mutilation of the extremities as barbaric, and I agree that Alexander was carried away into imitation of Median and Persian opulence and of the custom of barbarian kings not to countenance equality with subjects in their daily lives. Nor do I at all approve the facts that, though a descendant of Heracles, he substituted the dress of Medes for that traditional with Macedonians and that he was not ashamed to exchange the tiara of the Persians, whom he himself had conquered, for the head-dress he had long worn, but I take it that nothing is clearer proof than Alexander's great successes of the truth that neither bodily strength in anyone nor distinction of birth nor continuous good fortune in war, greater even than Alexander's—no matter if a man were to sail out right round Libya as well as Asia and subdue them, as Alexander actually thought of doing, or were to make Europe, with Asia and Libya, a third

69. Thus Brunt 1976: vol. I, p. x: "I can detect no Stoic colouring in the *Anabasis*."

70. See especially the "second preface" at Arr. *An.* 1.12; Moles 1985; Marincola 1989.

71. See also Arr. *An.* 4.9 (murder of Cleitus, *proskynesis*); 4.13.5–6 (the pages' conspiracy).

part of his empire—that not one of all these things is any contribution to man’s happiness, unless the man whose achievements are apparently so great were to possess at the same time command of his own passions.⁷²

Alexander is thus a more complicated figure than we might have expected, and much more useful than someone who was merely very great, or very bad.⁷³ It is tempting to wonder whether Arrian was interested in Alexander as a way to explore the nature of monarchy, as Dio Chrysostom was, but his interest need not have been political.⁷⁴ Seneca, at least, found in Alexander an *exemplum* of more general application, as the man who could conquer so much of the world, and fail to conquer his own passions.⁷⁵ Arrian and Seneca never explain what lessons we should draw from this, but in telling us about Alexander they do invite us to think about the problem.

The extent to which Posidonius, Strabo, and Arrian wrote history expressly to provide moral *exempla* must remain uncertain. But it is worth suggesting that a philosophical agenda of this sort may illuminate the statements of other historians about their moral purposes.⁷⁶ There is of course nothing particularly philosophical about an interest in *exempla* that inspire emulation.⁷⁷ But Livy adds the interesting corollary that *mala exempla* can deter bad behavior, and it is clear that he took this perception seriously.⁷⁸ It is perhaps no coincidence that Livy was known to Seneca as the author of philosophical dialogues as well as history, and at least one modern scholar has suggested that he was a Stoic.⁷⁹

Diodorus and Tacitus go further, as we have seen. Like Livy they point to the moral uses of *exempla* as central to the writing of history, and they point out that people who act well or badly can end up as *exempla* themselves. Diodorus

72. Translated by Brunt 1976, slightly modified.

73. Stadter 1980: 103–14 and Bosworth 1980: 12–16 see the discussions of Alexander’s failings as digressions that do not seriously diminish Arrian’s praise.

74. On the Stoic background of Dio Chrys. *Orat.* 2 see Pohlenz 1964: 414–34; Brunt 1973 [rpt. 1993].

75. Sen. *EM.* 113.29–31. See also Livy’s digression on Alexander at 9.2 with Morello 2002; on Alexander as an *exemplum* see Fears 1974; Spencer 2002.

76. See Fornara 1983: 104–20.

77. Ephorus, *FGrHist.* no. 70, frag. 42 = Str. 7.3.9; see also Sall. *Jug.* 4.5–6; D.H. *A.R.* 1.6.4; 5.75.1.

78. Livy *Praef.* 10: *Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in illustri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites* (“This is something particularly beneficial and fruitful in understanding things, that you can examine the evidence for every *exemplum* laid out clearly; and from that you can grasp what you should imitate, for your own benefit and for that of your country, and what, being rotten from start to finish, you should avoid.”); see Feldherr 1998; Chaplin 2000. Note that Livy was apparently anticipated by Sempronius Asellio, Frag. 2 in Peter 1914: 1.179–80 = Gell. 5.18.7: *Nam neque alacriores, inquit, ad rem p. defendendum neque seniores ad rem perperam faciendam annales libri commovere quicquam possunt* (“For, he said, the books of annals cannot [in contrast to history] make anyone more willing to defend the state or more reluctant to harm it.”)

79. Sen. *EM.* 100.9; Walsh 1961: 49–65.

makes this point in three of his prefaces, including his preface to the whole work. History, he says, not only passes on the accumulated wisdom of the ages, but also provides moral encouragement for the bad and the good alike:

καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἰδιώτας ἀξιόους ἡγεμονίας κατασκευάζει, τοὺς δ' ἡγεμόνας τῷ διὰ τῆς δόξης ἀθανατισμῷ προτρέπεται τοῖς καλλίστοις τῶν ἔργων ἐπιχειρεῖν, χωρὶς δὲ τούτων τοὺς μὲν στρατιώτας τοῖς μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν ἐπαίνους ἐτοιμοτέρους κατασκευάζει πρὸς τοὺς ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος κινδύνους, τοὺς δὲ πονηροὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ταῖς αἰωνίοις βλασφημίαις ἀποτρέπει τῆς ἐπὶ τὴν κακίαν ὀρμῆς.⁸⁰

D.S. 1.1.5

And it prepares private citizens to be worthy of leadership, and it encourages leaders to undertake the most glorious of deeds, through the immortality of their reputation; and apart from that it prepares soldiers to be more ready for dangers on behalf of their country, by means of the praises they receive after their death, and by its eternal condemnations it deters the wicked portion of the people from their impulse to evil.

This sentiment is now generally taken to be Diodorus' own, and the fact that he used it in two other prefaces shows that he was genuinely intrigued by it.⁸¹ But it is worth remembering, too, that an earlier chapter of the main preface has a strong hint of Stoicism, if it is not an outright borrowing from Posidonius.⁸²

Later Diodorus is more explicit about the connection between praise or denunciation and *exempla*:

Μνησθήσομαι τινῶν παραδείγματος ἕνεκα καὶ ἐπαίνου δικαίου καὶ τοῦ τῷ κοινῷ βίῳ συμφέροντος, ἵν' οἱ μὲν πονηροὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν βλασφημίας ἀποτρέπονται τῆς ἐπὶ τὴν κακίαν ὀρμῆς, οἱ δὲ ἀγαθοὶ διὰ τοὺς ἐκ τῆς αἰωνίου δόξης ἐπαίνους ἀντρέχονται τῶν καλῶν ἐπιτηδεύματων ὀρέγωνται.

D.S. 37.4.1

I will mention some people [or possibly “things”] for the sake of example and for the just praise that benefits society, so that wicked men will turn from their pursuit of evil due to history's condemnation, and so that good men will be eager to strive for the good due to praises of its eternal glory.

Like Chrysippus, in other words, Diodorus sees that deterrence is as important as inspiration.⁸³ And like Tacitus he suggests that history can turn people into new *exempla*. These ideas may, as Luce suggests, be something quite new among ancient justifications of history.⁸⁴ But a Stoic like Seneca would

80. I take καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἰδιώτας to be the beginning of a new sentence.

81. On the prefaces in Diodorus see Sacks 1990.

82. Above, n. 67.

83. Above, section 2.

84. Luce 1991; see above, pp. 359–60.

have understood Diodorus and Tacitus at once: of course an historian would focus on *exempla*, because readers would be moved to emulate good behavior and avoid the bad. And *exempla* would also be useful in figuring out which was which.

4. *EXEMPLA* IN TACITUS

There is as yet no comprehensive study of Tacitus' use of *exempla*.⁸⁵ In what follows we will confine our attention to the central question raised by Tacitus' statement about the *praecipuum munus annalium*: I argue that his narratives confirm that he was interested in the potential of *exempla* for moral instruction. And it is surely significant that his most obvious *exempla* are his principal Stoic characters; Tacitus shows us that difficult and changing circumstances prompted a variety of appropriate responses in Seneca, Barea Soranus, and Thrasea Paetus, and he invites us to consider the implications of their decisions for our own lives. Tacitus' other exemplary characters function in very similar ways; he finds useful *exempla* in some surprising places.

It is in this context that we should assess Tacitus' views on whether or not to cooperate with emperors. Moral decisions are complicated, and Tacitus is clear that in some circumstances collaboration with the regime could be just as virtuous as martyrdom; that was his point in the *Agricola*, and he remains fascinated by honorable and effective collaborators.⁸⁶ But his insistence on this point should not be mistaken for doubts about the validity of withdrawal or resistance, in the right circumstances. Tacitus goes out of his way to tell us about people who opposed tyrannical emperors and suffered for it, both avowed Stoics and people who exemplified Stoic principles without even realizing it. And he was just as interested in people who betrayed those principles. His readers might end up making different decisions about how to deal with emperors, and especially with tyrants. But with his *exempla*, whether of inspiration or deterrence, Tacitus was giving them something to work with.

4.1 *VIRTUS IPSA*

The most conspicuously heroic of the Stoics in Tacitus are Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus. Tacitus introduces his account of their deaths with a remarkable declaration:

Trucidatis tot insignibus viris ad postremum Nero virtutem ipsam ex-
scindere concupivit interfecto Thrasea Paeto et Barea Sorano, etc.

Ann. 16.21.1

85. See however Salmon 1989; Feldherr 1998: 218–21; Davies 2004: 145.

86. See section 5 below.

After the slaughter of so many distinguished men Nero in the end desired to cut out virtue itself, with the deaths of Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus.⁸⁷

The phrase *virtus ipsa* may be a Stoic catch-phrase.⁸⁸ It is not clear whether Tacitus makes the comment in his own voice, or whether he attributes it to Nero's private ironical thinking, but in either case it is hard not to see the phrase as a pointed endorsement of Nero's victims. If we are looking for Tacitean *exempla* to inspire emulation, there is no better place to start. Scholars have sometimes understood Tacitus to be presenting a distinctly jaundiced view of Thrasea.⁸⁹ But we should take the words *virtus ipsa* very seriously: Tacitus is presenting us with two men about whom, for once, his attitude is completely clear. And as *exempla virtutis* they offer more than just inspiration; they also provide case studies, in how two good men dealt with a tyrant.⁹⁰

In the case of Barea we are given very little information about his relationship with the regime prior to his final, fatal, encounter. He previously appeared only as someone willing to work with the regime, proposing rewards for the freedman Pallas (*Ann.* 12.53.2). We are given no guidance on how to interpret the proposal, and on the face of it Tacitus seems to regard Barea as merely another flatterer. But the fact that Barea is later called *virtus ipsa* means there is something important to be learned here. In the right circumstances, it seems, even flattery of someone like Pallas might be entirely appropriate.

The complicated relationship between Nero and Thrasea is presented in much more detail; it is here, if anywhere, that Tacitus uses *exempla* to explore complicated moral choices. Like Barea, Thrasea ended up as an overt opponent of the regime, but here too Tacitus shows us that this had not always been the case. Choices about how to behave under an emperor like Nero were complicated.

Thrasea is introduced to us quite deliberately, in the context of a senatorial debate on the number of gladiators permitted to the Syracusans:

Non referrem vulgarissimum senatus consultum, quo civitati Syracusanorum egredi numerum edendis gladiatoribus finitum permittebatur, nisi Paetus Thrasea contra dixisset praebuissetque materiem obtrektoribus arguendae sententiae. cur enim, si rem publicam egere libertate senatoria crederet, tam levia consecraretur? quin de bello aut pace, de vectigalibus et legibus, quibusque aliis <res> Romana continetur, suaderet dis-

87. Note also Tac. *Hist.* 2.91.3: *sed Thraseam ad exemplar verae gloriae legisset*, "that he had selected Thrasea as an example of true glory."

88. Lucian, *Vit. Auct.* 20 (Hermes, speaking for the Stoics): ἀὐτὴν τὴν ἀρετὴν πωλῶ ("I'm selling virtue itself").

89. Walker 1952: 229: "Thrasea himself is the subject of some of Tacitus' most taunting criticisms." Mellor 1993: 75 claims that Tacitus is suspicious of the "stubborn self-righteousness" of Thrasea (and of Helvidius Priscus). For contrary views see Martin 1981: 177 and esp. Brunt 1975: 26–27. For a survey of the problem see Städele 1990, who rightly emphasizes the phrase *virtus ipsa*.

90. Brunt 1975 is an important guide to reading Tacitus as sympathetic to Stoic thought.

suaderetve? licere patribus, quotiens ius dicendae sententiae accepissent, quae vellent expromere relationemque in ea postulare. an solum emendatione dignum, ne Syracusis spectacula largius ederentur: cetera per omnes imperii partes perinde egregia quam si non Nero, sed Thrasea regimen eorum teneret? quod si summa dissimulatione transmitterentur, quanto magis inanibus abstinendum! Thrasea contra, rationem poscentibus amicis, non praesentium ignarum respondebat eius modi consulta corrigere, sed patrum honori dare, ut manifestum fieret magnarum rerum curam non dissimulatuos, qui animum etiam levissimis adverterent.

Ann. 13.49

I would not mention a very insignificant *senatus consultum*, by which the Syracusans were allowed to exceed the usual limit on gladiators, except for the fact that Thrasea Paetus opposed it, and thus gave his detractors an excuse to criticize his vote. For, they said, if he believed that the state was in need of senatorial freedom, why did he concern himself with such trivial things? Why did he not take a stand on issues such as war or peace, taxes or laws, and other things essential to the Roman state? A senator was permitted, once it was his turn to give his opinion, to explain his point of view and ask for a vote. Was this the only thing that required correction: to make sure that the shows in Syracuse not become more extravagant? Were other things throughout the empire in such good shape, as though it was Thrasea and not Nero who was in charge of them? Because if he was going to pass over and ignore the most important things, shouldn't he all the more leave the trivial alone? When his friends asked for an explanation, Thrasea replied that, on the contrary, he was not unaware of the real state of affairs when he made corrections to such measures. But he had enough respect for the senators to think that it would be obvious to them that someone who paid attention even to trivial things would not ignore the oversight of what was important.

It has been suggested that we are supposed to agree with Thrasea's detractors; Bessie Walker thought that their arguments seem more powerful than his reply.⁹¹ But the consequences of this reading are serious: we would have to see Thrasea as not merely ineffectual, but downright hypocritical. As Brunt has argued, Thrasea's thinking actually provides us with a clear case of Stoic moral reasoning at work. Stoics were supposed to cooperate in good faith with those around them, as long as this was not an unacceptable betrayal of moral principle. Each Stoic had his (or her) own standard for what would be unacceptable: servility appropriate for a slave would be unacceptable to someone to whom personal freedom was fundamental. But as long as they could do so without unacceptable compromises, Stoics were also expected to help improve the societies in which they lived, by doing their duty. Their participation, at whatever level of moral involvement was appropriate, made society better, not so much because improvement mattered for its own sake,

91. Walker 1952: 229.

as because the attempt offered a good example to others; attention to even the smallest details showed, as Tacitus has now told us, that you were mindful of the bigger issues.⁹²

Tacitus knows that Thrasea's moral calculations are not easy ones. Thrasea presumably did not like having to keep silent on more substantive matters, and would no doubt have said that the Senate was only a shadow of its former self. But as readers we are to infer that, at this stage, all is not lost: Thrasea had decided that the challenges to his sense of duty were not such as to require him to protest or withdraw, and that his corner of the universe would work more smoothly if he remained a participant. Tacitus does not explain all this: he merely juxtaposes the two sides of the debate and invites us to figure it out. But we are not, I think, supposed to be in any doubt about the rightness of Thrasea's actions; he too will be called *virtus ipsa*. What we are supposed to think about is what makes him right.

The next installment of the Thrasea story presents him as a much more conspicuous opponent of the regime. Nero's murder of his mother provoked astonishingly little criticism. Seneca and Burrus, when informed of the first murder attempt, never protested. When Nero was racked with guilt for completing the murder he was encouraged by the flattery first of the praetorian officers (prompted by Burrus) and then by public thank offerings in the towns of Campania (*Ann.* 14.10.2). In Rome the Senate's reaction to the news was even more encouraging: thank offerings, celebratory games, a statue of Nero and Minerva in the Senate, and the declaration that Agrippina's birthday was to be considered *nefas*. Thrasea was the only dissenter:

Thrasea Paetus silentio vel brevi adsensu priores adulationes transmittere solitus exitum senatu, ac sibi causam periculi fecit, ceteris libertatis initium non praebuit.

Ann. 14.12.1

Thrasea Paetus, who had been in the habit of bypassing earlier expressions of adulation either in silence or with brief concurrence, at that point departed from the Senate. He thus put himself into danger: he caused no stirrings of *libertas* in others.

Briefly though the incident is discussed, it is clearly intended as a dramatic counterpoint to the depressing tale of acquiescence that led up to it. Unfortunately Tacitus' attitude to Thrasea's gesture is difficult to pin down, and his Latin is open to very different translations. Many scholars understand Tacitus as suggesting that what Thrasea did was pointless.⁹³ But Tacitus' words can also be read as condemnation not of Thrasea, but of those who failed to respond as they should

92. See esp. Brunt 1975: 26.

93. e.g. Furneaux 1968: ad loc. and p. 80. Walker 1952: 230 accuses Thrasea of "vanity."

have.⁹⁴ For the Stoics the actual effect of an action was anyway not the most important consideration; what mattered more was that they do the right thing in the circumstances.⁹⁵ Thus Tacitus shows us how Thrasea went from quibbling over minor matters to conspicuously rejecting matricide, and this allows us to see how the moral calculus can change. Tacitus is troubled by Thrasea's failure to have any effect on those around him, but the failure is not Thrasea's. And where Thrasea's contemporaries may not have learned from the *exemplum* he offered, Tacitus' readers are given the chance to do better.

The next Thrasea episode shows him continuing to participate in senatorial debate, and even having an effect. When the praetor Antistius was convicted of *maiestas*, for reciting verses hostile to the emperor, his accusers proposed the death penalty, but Thrasea argued that the penalty should be reduced to exile and confiscation of property. Tacitus makes it clear that to be persuasive Thrasea had to be almost egregiously tactful:

ceteris inde adsentientibus, Paetus Thrasea, multo cum honore Caesaris et acerrime increpito Antistio, non quicquid nocens reus pati mereretur, id egregio sub principe et nulla necessitate obstricto senatui statuendum disseruit. carnificem et laqueum pridem abolita, et esse poenas legibus constitutas, quibus sine iudicum saevitia et temporum infamia supplicia decernerentur. quin in insula publicatis bonis, quo longius sontem vitam traxisset, eo privatim miserior et publicae clementiae maximum exemplum futurum.

Ann. 14.48.3–4

Although the others were in agreement [with the proposed death penalty], Thrasea Paetus, with praise of the emperor and having savagely attacked Antistius, argued that it was not what a convicted criminal *deserved* to suffer that should be decreed under an honorable emperor, when the Senate was free to think for itself.⁹⁶ The executioner and the noose had been abolished long ago, and there were penalties established by the laws which provided for punishment without judicial savagery or disgrace to their age. Whereas if sent to an island, with his property confiscated, the longer he dragged out his flawed life the more miserable he would be personally, and he would provide an important example of official clemency.

At first sight the argument seems like mere sycophancy on the part of Thrasea. But he might well have thought that verses critical of the emperor—at least some

94. Koestermann 1968: 47; Brunt 1975: 331n.143: "I think that Tacitus decries the servility of the senate rather than Thrasea's courage."

95. See e.g. Sen. *Tranq.* 1.12, quoted above, section 2.6.

96. I take it this is a reasonable translation of *nulla necessitate obstricto senatui*; it could also mean that the senate was not facing some crisis.

verses—were inappropriate; if so, Thrasea’s condemnation of what Antistius had done was perfectly consistent with his sense of duty.

In the Antistius affair one of the factors that Thrasea presumably took into account was the possibility that his proposal might actually be accepted. In this case Tacitus goes on to demonstrate the beneficial effects of Thrasea’s intervention. Senators were roused to speak in support of his proposal of leniency, and most of them voted for it:

Libertas Thraseae servitium aliorum rupit, et postquam discessionem consul permiserat, pedibus in sententiam eius iere, paucis ex<c>eptis, in quibus adulatione promptissimus fuit A. Vitellius, optimum quemque iurgio lacessens et respondenti reticens, ut pavida ingenia solent.

Ann. 14.49.1

Thrasea’s freedom [of speech and of conscience] put an end to the servility of the others, and after the consul had allowed a vote they went over to his side. There were only a few exceptions, including Aulus Vitellius, who was the quickest to flatter [the emperor]; he attacked all the good men with insults and was silent when they responded, as is the way with cowardly natures.

The consuls were too intimidated to ratify the decree, but they did write to Nero about it, and he too felt the effects of Thrasea’s influence. Nero eventually replied that they could do what they thought best in this case, and although he was clearly angry, the *exemplum* was having an effect. Neither the consuls nor Thrasea were intimidated:

his atque talibus recitatis et offensione manifesta, non ideo aut consules mutavere relationem aut Thrasea decessit sententia ceterive quae probaverant deseruere, pars, ne principem obiecisse invidiae viderentur, plures numero tuti, Thrasea sueta firmitudine animi et ne gloria intercideret.

Ann. 14.49.3

When these sentiments [of Nero] and similar ones were read out, making his anger very clear, the consuls did not on that account change the motion, Thrasea did not change his opinion, and the others did not abandon the decision they had made. For some this was because they did not want to seem to put the emperor in an invidious position, but for most it was because there was safety in numbers; for Thrasea it was his customary steadfastness of mind, and the preservation of his glory.

For once we get a sense of how monarchy could be made to work: the unworthy impulses of an emperor would be held in check if people—the senators above all—would speak up and do their duty. Had Thrasea failed to make an impact his attempt would still have been a virtuous act, but for Tacitus what matters just as much is the effect that he could have on others. Thrasea’s interest in his own *gloria* is not vulgar publicity-seeking, but is an important part of the moral calculus. And

the historian helps preserve the *exemplum* of a man saying the right thing at the right time.

Thrasea continued as an effective senatorial leader, and we next see him making a suggestion that is adopted almost immediately. Claudius Timarchus, a wealthy provincial residing in Crete, was prosecuted for a number of reasons, including the fact that he had boasted of his power over governors; Thrasea both endorsed the proposed sentence of exile and suggested a solution to the general problem (*Ann.* 15.20.2). Tacitus gives us a version of Thrasea's speech: he condemned excessive deference to provincials, and suggested abolishing votes of thanks. What is surprising, given Thrasea's track record, is the enthusiastic approval given his proposal in the Senate. There was a technical hitch, since the consuls pointed out that they could not sanction a new proposal in the midst of a senatorial trial, but at this point, more surprisingly still, Nero intervened: on the emperor's initiative they passed a resolution doing exactly what Thrasea had suggested (*Ann.* 15.22.1).

This most conspicuous example of successful cooperation between Thrasea and the regime was also the last. The next thing to happen in the *Annals* is the birth and death of Nero's baby daughter by Poppaea. The Senate was extravagant in its celebration of her birth, and in its mourning of her death, and Nero too was excessively emotional. It is in this context that he revealed, finally, that Thrasea's independence of mind was unacceptable, though he still tried to pretend otherwise:

adnotatum est, omni senatu Antium sub recentem partum effuso, Thraseam prohibitum immoto animo praenuntiam imminentis caedis contumeliam excepisse. secutam dehinc vocem Caesaris ferunt, qua reconciliatum se Thraseae apud Senecam iactaverit, ac Senecam Caesari gratulatum. unde gloria egregiis viris et pericula gliscebant.

Ann. 15.23.4

It was observed, when the whole Senate poured out to Antium to celebrate the recent birth, that Thrasea was prevented from coming, and that he accepted the insult with equanimity, as an announcement of his impending death. This was, they say, followed by a comment of the emperor, who supposedly boasted that he and Thrasea had been reconciled, and he was congratulated on this by Seneca. But from this point on both the glory and the dangers, for both these worthy men, were increasing.

Nero dissimulated, moving from an open break to an unconvincing claim of reconciliation. But Tacitus has given us a glimpse of what an accommodation between such an emperor and a man of principle would have been like. Had Nero been a different person, and had he been surrounded by different people, Thrasea, the Senate, and the emperor could have worked together. If people would only do their duty, even a regime like Nero's would have possibilities.

It is the question of duty—understanding it as well as doing it—that drives much of the long story that concludes the *Annals* in their present form, and it is

no accident that the key incidents are specifically identified for us as *exempla*. We return to the story of Thrasea in 66 CE, when Tacitus connects him for the first time with Barea Soranus. Though neither man had any connection with the Pisonian conspiracy, their deaths are presented as a kind of climax to the murders that the conspiracy provoked, and, as we have seen, they are identified now as embodiments of *virtus*. Tacitus goes on to say that Nero had long hated both men, particularly Thrasea. Thrasea had walked out of the Senate rather than participate in discussions of Agrippina's death. He had annoyed Nero by getting Antistius' death sentence reduced to one of exile, and we now learn that he had been absent from the session in which divine honors had been voted to the deceased Poppaea.⁹⁷ Thrasea had also refused to participate in Nero's new festival, the Juvenalia; this was thought particularly objectionable because his principles had not prevented him from singing in a tragedy in his home town of Padua (*Ann.* 16.21.1).⁹⁸ Tacitus does not explain the contradiction, but we need not assume hypocrisy on Thrasea's part. Tacitus tells us very clearly that the festival was very old, going back to Antenor, and we might infer that Thrasea had simply been fulfilling traditional obligations back home, and had been equally justified in ignoring Nero's disgraceful innovation.⁹⁹

Despite all these reasons for hatred, Nero took no action. The attack on Thrasea was instigated by Cossutianus Capito, because Thrasea had been behind his prosecution for extortion (*Ann.* 16.21.3).¹⁰⁰ According to Tacitus, Cossutianus added to Nero's existing resentment by portraying Thrasea as a rebel against the imperial regime, a sort of Brutus of the Neronian age. This rebellion consisted of withdrawal from public life: Thrasea had dodged the customary oath of office at the new year, the state vows, and the sacrifices for the emperor and his "celestial voice." Moreover he was no longer the dedicated participant in senatorial debates that he was when we first met him; for three years he had been absent from the Senate, and concerned himself only with private affairs, even as his colleagues were dealing with allegations of treason.¹⁰¹ His withdrawal from politics was, according to Cossutianus, already having an impact on others: he had an immediate circle of henchmen (*satellites*), who imitated his austere behavior as a way of criticizing Nero's self-indulgence, but his influence extended to the provinces and the armies (*Ann.* 16.22.3). Thus Thrasea was having an enormous effect, and had even more potential, as an *exemplum*. Moreover, Cossutianus is quite clear that Thrasea's influence was bound up with his Stoicism:

“aut transeamus ad illa instituta, si potiora sunt, aut nova cupientibus auferatur dux et auctor. ista secta Tiberones et Favonios, veteri quoque rei

97. For Antistius see *Ann.* 14.48, discussed above; for the honors of Poppaea see *Ann.* 16.6.3.

98. Tacitus mentions the Juvenalia at *Ann.* 14.15.1, without there mentioning Thrasea.

99. Brunt 1975: 27; see also Linderski 1992.

100. For the extortion charge see *Ann.* 13.33.3.

101. Against Silanus and Vetus, see *Ann.* 16.7 and 16.10.

publicae ingrata nomina, genuit. ut imperium evertant, libertatem praeferunt: si perverterint, libertatem ipsam adgredientur. frustra Cassium amovisti, si gliscere et vigere Brutorum aemulos passurus es.”

Ann. 16.22.4–5

“Let us either go over to their principles, if they are better, or let us remove the leader and instigator of those who are longing for change. That sect is the one that produced Tubero and Favonius, names that were disliked even in the old republic. They parade their *libertas* in order to overthrow the empire; and if they do destroy it, they will go on to attack *libertas* itself. Getting rid of Cassius was pointless, if you’re going to allow imitators of the Brutuses to grow more powerful and to flourish.”¹⁰²

Cossutianus is shown deliberately distorting the Stoic attitude to monarchy; he omits any reference to Cato, with his very different emotional impact, as well as any explanation of Thrasea’s earlier willingness to cooperate with the regime. But as readers we can see through such a distorted picture; we are repelled by the obvious opportunism of Cossutianus, and prompted to reflect on why Thrasea decided at this point to withdraw from political life.

The climax to the stories of both Barea and Thrasea comes with the visit of Tiridates of Armenia. The enemies of Barea, according to Tacitus, either wanted the excitement of the visit to obscure what they were doing or—more likely—wanted to make it clear that Nero was the equal of any eastern monarch in his ability to destroy important men (*Ann.* 16.23.2). The entire city gathered to receive Nero and Tiridates—we note again Tacitus’ interest in the audience for such moments—but Thrasea was kept from attending. Thrasea kept his spirits up, however, and he wrote to the emperor asking for an explanation and an opportunity to defend himself. Nero was excited at the thought that Thrasea might have confessed to some failing, but he was disappointed: Thrasea’s obvious integrity—his demeanor, his spirit, and his *libertas*—was downright frightening (*Ann.* 16.24.2). Integrity would get you into trouble with the regime, but it apparently had an effect on those in charge.

The announcement that Thrasea was to be tried in the Senate presented him with a dilemma, and he consulted with his friends (*Ann.* 16.25–26). This indecision might look at first like moral weakness, but the Stoics realized that life was complicated: the question was not whether one should do one’s duty, but how to choose among duties that competed with one another. Stoics also recognized that talking things over with one’s friends could help in sorting things out, and of course it was standard practice in the Roman world anyway.¹⁰³ Consultation

102. We were told at *Ann.* 16.7.1 that the jurist C. Cassius was charged with excessive devotion to his ancestor.

103. *Sen. EM.* 109.14–15; *Cic. Off.* 1.147. See Crook 1955: 4, for consultation as a regular practice in private affairs.

did not mean ducking responsibility, and in fact Thrasea ends up making his final decision on his own.

The debate, as presented by Tacitus, explores further the ever-important question of collaboration and resistance. There were those who argued that a confrontation would be the best way to have a positive impact. They had no doubts about Thrasea's constancy, and what he would say could only enhance his glory. An honorable death should be a public one, and a confrontation would impress all ranks of society:

adspiceret populus virum morti obvium, audiret senatus voces quasi ex aliquo numine supra humanas: posse ipso miraculo etiam Neronem permoveri: sin crudelitati insisteret, distingui certe apud posteros memoriam honesti exitus ab ignavia per silentium pereuntium.

Ann. 16.25.2

Let the people look at a man who can confront death, let the Senate hear words more than human, inspired by some divinity. And there was the possibility that even Nero might be moved by this very miracle; and if he persists in his cruelty, our descendants will at least be able to see the difference between the memory of an honorable death and the cowardice of those who perish in silence.

The argument is a powerful one, touching on some of the most central questions in Tacitus, and in Stoicism: how you die, and how your behavior affects others, including future generations.

But of course this is only one side of the debate; there were other ways to influence the regime, and there were other relationships that would be affected by Thrasea's behavior. Confrontation, it was suggested, might prompt others to join the prosecution, and it would be better if they were spared that temptation; Nero was not going to change his mind, and he might be provoked to take revenge on Thrasea's wife, daughter, and other family members. Above all, avoiding a confrontation would lead to a death that, in its own way, was even more glorious: *proinde intemeratus, impollutus, quorum vestigiis et studiis vitam duxerit, eorum gloria peteret finem* (*Ann.* 16.26.3: "And thus, undefiled and unpolluted, he should seek a death that has the glory of those in whose footsteps and studies he spent his life"). Tacitus seems to admire the second of these options more, but he does not want us to think the decision was an easy one.

The debate among Thrasea's friends is complicated by the fact that the young Arulenus Rusticus, another Stoic, presented a third option: he offered to use his tribunician veto to confront the regime himself:

aderat consilio Rusticus Arulenus, flagrans iuvenis, et cupidine laudis offerebat se intercessurum senatus consulto: nam plebi tribunus erat. cohibuit spiritus eius Thrasea: ne vana et reo non profutura, intercessori exitiosa inciperet. sibi actam aetatem, et tot per annos continuum vitae ordinem non deserendum: illi initium magistratum et integra quae su-

persint. multum ante secum expenderet, quod tali in tempore capessendae rei publicae iter ingrederetur.

Ann. 16.26.4–5

Arulenus Rusticus, a passionate young man, was also present at this discussion. Out of a desire for praise he offered to veto the *senatus consultum*, for he was a tribune of the plebs. Thrasea restrained his ardor, on the grounds that it would be an empty gesture and of no use to the defendant, and would bring destruction to the person who made the veto. He himself (said Thrasea) had lived out his time, and it would not be right to abandon a way of life that had been consistent for so many years; but that young man had his whole magisterial career and the rest of his life before him. He should think long and hard about what path to take at such a difficult time for anyone beginning public life.

In calling attention to Arulenus' youth Tacitus is perhaps alluding to the fact that Rusticus was later to write Thrasea's biography, and would be executed for doing so.¹⁰⁴ But his readers will have felt a particular connection with a man who, as Tacitus reminds them, was their contemporary.

Whatever the merits of Arulenus' later career, it seems clear that we are supposed to see his proposal at this stage as flawed: Arulenus is described as over-eager (*flagrans*) and motivated by a desire for praise (*cupidine laudis*). This hints at the underlying moral logic, but still requires us to think it through: why shouldn't Arulenus have done as he proposed? Tacitus draws our attention to the fact that two men were in very different situations.¹⁰⁵ If, we might think, Arulenus had been confident that his duties as tribune required him to veto the Senate's action, Thrasea would presumably have encouraged him to do so, but instead he suggested thinking carefully about the balance between resistance and cooperation. And Tacitus encourages his readers to do the same, pointing out that Thrasea in the end went away to think things over for himself (*Ann.* 16.26.5).

At this point the scene shifts to the Senate, where a speech from Nero argues that senators like Thrasea who withdraw from their duties set, of all things, a bad example (*Ann.* 16.27.2). This prompts attacks on Thrasea by Cossutianus and then by Eprius Marcellus, whose speech is reported in detail; it mentions by name the most prominent Stoic opponents of the regime, and suggests that Thrasea by his withdrawal from public life is actually harming the state (*Ann.* 16.28). The senators are portrayed as sympathetic to Thrasea and the others, whom they see as completely innocent, but they are also intimidated, not just by Marcellus himself, but by armed soldiers.¹⁰⁶

But if the senators could be intimidated, others could not. The story of Barea Soranus resumes at this point, with two rather unexpected heroes, Soranus'

104. See Tac. *Agr.* 2.1; Syme 1958: 298.

105. Brunt 1975: 15.

106. Tac. *Ann.* 16.29.1: Tacitus places discussion of the senators' fear *before* his discussion of their sympathy for the victims, but this is one of his characteristic inversions for rhetorical purposes.

daughter Servilia, and a rich provincial named Cassius Asclepiodotus. There is also a spectacular betrayal by an avowed Stoic named Publius Egnatius. Servilia, accused of dabbling in treasonous magic, explained that she was innocent, but stressed above all that her father was not involved (*Ann.* 16.31). Barea was no less determined to take all the blame, and the two of them presented a heart-breaking spectacle of family loyalty (*Ann.* 16.32.1).

This made even more conspicuous the betrayal of Publius Egnatius, who testified against one or both of them, for money, even though Barea was his patron. This man, says Tacitus, was a Stoic and a fraud, who pretended to be an honorable man but was in fact deceitful, avaricious, and lustful. And once he was rich enough to indulge his tastes, he became an *exemplum* himself, of what *not* to become (*dedit exemplum praecavendi*); he showed that deceitful friends pretending to be good could be just as bad as obviously wicked people (*Ann.* 16.32.3). Asclepiodotus, on the other hand, was a rich Bithynian, who had honored Barea previously and was not going to desert him now; his resolution made him an *honestum exemplum* (*Ann.* 16.33.1).

The importance of Thrasea as an *exemplum* is brought home with particular force by his last moments. The arresting officer finds him in suitably philosophic conversation with friends and family, but Thrasea sends most of them away for their own safety. His wife Arria wanted to stay and die with him, because she wanted to follow the *exemplum* of her mother, who had died along with her husband.¹⁰⁷ In this case, however, there were other considerations, and Thrasea urges her to leave so that their daughter would not be orphaned (*Ann.* 16.34).¹⁰⁸

Thrasea is here presented as someone acutely aware of his own role as an *exemplum*.¹⁰⁹ And Tacitus is clearly focused on those who can profit most from Thrasea's example. Thrasea's last words are to the young quaestor who delivered the senatorial decree:

propius vocato quaestore "libamus" inquit "Iovi liberatori. specta, iu-
venis; et omen quidem dii prohibeant, ceterum in ea tempora natus es
quibus firmare animum expedit constantibus exemplis."

Ann. 16.35.1

and calling the quaestor closer he said, "We are making a libation to
Jupiter the Liberator. Look, young man: may the Gods avert the omen,
but you have been born into times when it may be useful to strengthen
resolve with *exempla* of constancy."

As with Arulenus Rusticus the text looks forward to a future generation.

107. Her mother, Arria Maior, had died in 42 along with her husband Caecina Paetus, accused of conspiring against Claudius (Dio 60.16.6); she was famous for her last words, *Paete, non dolet* (Martial 1.14; Pliny *Ep.* 3.16.6).

108. The daughter, Fannia, was married at the time to Helvidius Priscus. She was still alive in Tacitus' day (Pliny *Ep.* 7.19).

109. See Chaplin 2000 for the self-consciousness of *exempla*.

4.2 SENECA

While Thrasea and Barea are carefully identified as *virtus ipsa*, Seneca is a more equivocal figure. Tacitus' examination of his career and his death is an obvious counterpart to his account of Thrasea's thoughtful but heroic Stoic career, and Seneca's reputation, at least in modern times, has not always survived the comparison. Some scholars (especially English-speaking ones) have seen irony, and even sarcasm, in Tacitus' account of a man who acquired immense wealth and influence as Nero's advisor, but died a death that was so conspicuously that of a philosopher.¹¹⁰ But it is important to notice that Tacitus comes close to an endorsement of Seneca, identifying him as Thrasea's companion in danger: *unde gloria egregiis viris et pericula gliscebant* (*Ann.* 15.23.4: "But after this both the glory and the dangers were increasing for these worthy men").¹¹¹

It is no surprise that a Stoic, try though he might, did not achieve the moral heights of a *sapiens*, and Seneca himself was appealingly modest about his own success in that regard. And for Tacitus the crucial thing was surely that Seneca was in a very different position from that of Thrasea: as an advisor to Nero his duty, as a Stoic, was to make the regime as successful as possible without violating his principles. It is easy from a distance to condemn people in this situation, but the Stoics did not allow themselves such easy answers: individual conscience mattered, of course, but so did helping others, and Tacitus gives us a Seneca who tried to do what was required of him given his unique situation. In the end Seneca had to give up, and Tacitus shows us how he arrived at this decision, and how he dealt with its consequences.

As he begins his account of the reign of Nero Tacitus emphasizes that it was Seneca and Burrus who kept things from being worse than they were. Agrippina was responsible for two deaths at the outset, he says, but there would have been more if Seneca and Burrus had not been there to counteract her influence:

Ibaturque in caedes, nisi Afranius Burrus et Annaeus Seneca obviam
issent. hi rectores imperatoriae iuventae et, rarum in societate potentiae,
concordes, diversa arte ex aequo pollebant, Burrus militaribus curis et
severitate morum, Seneca praeceptis eloquentiae et comitate honesta,
iuvantes in vicem, quo facilius lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem
aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retinerent.

Ann. 13.2.1

And there would have been more murders, if Afranius Burrus and Annaeus Seneca had not intervened. These men guided the youthful emperor with a harmony not often found when there is a division of power, each man being equally effective in different areas: Burrus had military expertise and a personal austerity, Seneca provided rhetorical instruction

110. For useful surveys see Griffin 1992: 441–44; Brinkmann 2002: 1–4.

111. The passage is quoted above, section 4.1.

and the companionship of an upright man; each one helped in turn to restrain the emperor's youthful susceptibility, should he reject virtue, by granting him certain pleasures.

Whatever the attractions of moral absolutes, Seneca was not in a position to wash his hands of the regime; his duty, as a Stoic, was to do as much for his fellow citizens as was consistent with his own sense of integrity. And thus he was often forced to choose the lesser of two evils, in the interests of better government. He countered Agrippina's sexual offensive by encouraging Nero's affair with the freedwoman Acte (*Ann.* 13.13; 14.2). And together with Burrus he tried to satisfy Nero with private chariot racing, to avoid the more public scandal of going on stage; they failed, but it is hard to blame them for trying (*Ann.* 14.14).

Seneca's most spectacular moral compromise was prompted by the plot to murder Agrippina. Nero was paralyzed with fear when he learned that his plan had failed, and his only hope was that Seneca and Burrus could think of a way out. The two advisors had perhaps not known about the plot, and when Nero consulted them they needed time to think:

quos statim acciverat, incertum an et ante ignaros. igitur longum utriusque silentium, ne inriti dissuaderent, an eo descensum credebant, <ut>, nisi praeveniretur Agrippina, pereundum Neroni esset.

Ann. 14.7.2–3

He had summoned them immediately, though it is unclear whether or not they had known of the plot in advance. Each man was silent for a long time, either because they thought they would fail to get Nero to change his mind or because they thought that it had reached the point that Nero would have to die unless Agrippina were stopped.

By explicitly including their pause for thought Tacitus signals that their dilemma is a very real one. A modern reader presumably thinks that this was the moment for them to decide that enough was enough; like Thræsea, they could have withdrawn their support from an emperor who had now descended to matricide. But Tacitus may be asking simply for us to reflect on the situation. The two advisors were in a difficult position. They would still be in a position to exercise a positive influence, at least in some matters, as long as Nero did not feel betrayed by them now. And a living Nero, however imperfectly restrained, was still preferable to the civil war that would be caused by his death. Tacitus can admire Thræsea for doing his duty as a senator and walking out, and he can condemn sycophants. But an advisor who might be able to restrain his emperor has a more complicated moral calculus to do, at least when the alternative is no restraint at all. By contrast, an advisor who is ignored has a very different set of obligations, and Seneca withdraws from imperial service, finally, once he can no longer be of any use (*Ann.* 14.52.1).

Tacitus is clearly interested in the fact that some people saw Seneca's support of Nero as merely self-serving. Seneca is said to have written the speeches Nero

gave to explain his pardon of Plautius Lateranus, and he did this, according to Tacitus, either to show the world that the advice he was providing was honorable, or simply to show off (*Ann.* 13.11.2). More sinister still was the suggestion that it was Seneca's eloquence that was responsible for Nero's appalling account of his mother's murder (*Ann.* 14.11.3). But as readers we are not required to endorse these criticisms. Certainly Seneca's later critics are not people we admire; Seneca is attacked after his retirement by the odious Suillius and his loathsome advisors (*Ann.* 13.42).

Tacitus presents the dying Seneca as preoccupied with his own role as an *exemplum*. Modern readers have found the scene laden with irony; Seneca is sometimes seen as too theatrical and too self-conscious an imitator of Socrates to be taken seriously as a martyr.¹¹² But Tacitus portrays Seneca reflecting on his own career, and we are invited to reflect upon it as well. Denied the right to make a will, Seneca told his friends that all he could leave them was the story of his own life (*imaginem vitae suae relinquere testatur*), from which they would be able to profit (*Ann.* 15.62.1). He ends up yielding precedence as an *exemplum* to his wife Paulina, when she insists on trying to die alongside him, but that discussion serves simply to emphasize the importance of the issue:

tum Seneca gloriae eius non adversus, simul amore, ne sibi unice dilectam ad iniurias relinqueret, "vitae" inquit "delenimenta monstraveram tibi, tu mortis decus mavis: non invidebo exemplo. sit huius tam fortis exitus constantia penes utrosque par, claritudinis plus in tuo fine."

Ann. 15.63.2

Then Seneca objected no more to her acquisition of glory, and he was also prompted by love, not wanting to abandon a woman he loved so well to insults. "I had shown you the consolations of life," he said, "but you have chosen the distinction of death; I will not begrudge you your opportunity to be an *exemplum*. I hope that each of us will be equally brave in the face of death, but your end will be the more famous."

All of this has a poignancy for its own sake, not really diminished by the fact that Tacitus adds that Paulina actually survived her husband by a few years.¹¹³ In showing us a Seneca preoccupied with the question of *exempla* to the very end, Tacitus rounds out the complicated story of his political and philosophical choices. Seneca's career, like Thræsea's, could help readers think more clearly about productive collaboration, and its limits.

112. E.g. Dyson 1970; Henry and Walker 1963: 109: "The attitude of Seneca to his coming death is so priggish and his commonplaces so devastatingly banal that the reader may feel that Seneca almost deserved death for his loquacity and dullness." For more positive readings see Martin 1981: 184; Syme 1970: 138: "But it would be an error to suppose that Tacitus means any depreciation of Seneca. He accords him a proper recognition—the much-maligned who none the less did his best in an impossible situation."

113. On the importance of Paulina see Reydams-Schils 2005: 171–75.

4.3 MINOR CHARACTERS AS *EXEMPLA*

Although the *exempla* explored in greatest depths are Stoics, Tacitus also tells us about people who act on Stoic principles without being Stoics themselves. Thus Burrus, not previously identified as having philosophic interests, utters as his last words a phrase associated with a Stoic's good death.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the conspiracy of Piso and its aftermath receives so much attention, it seems, because of the impressive number of death scenes.¹¹⁵ One of the most memorable deaths, that of the freedwoman Epicharis, is said to be a particularly impressive *exemplum*, in that she had a moral strength lacking in those more privileged by sex and social status (*Ann.* 15.57.2). Similarly, it is two soldiers, Subrius Flavus and Sulpicius Asper, who have the moral courage to tell Nero to his face what they think of him, and each is singled out as an *exemplum constantiae* (*Ann.* 15.68.1). Like Seneca, Tacitus apparently believes that some of the most powerful *exempla* are those offered by people in whom such strength of mind would not normally be expected.¹¹⁶

In other instances we are given less help in deciding what to think. The crucial things for Tacitus, in some cases, are dying in a way that does no harm to others, and dying in a way that is true to one's identity. It is utterly appropriate, for example, that Flavus remains the stern disciplinarian to the last, telling his executioners to dig better and strike harder, and it is for the same reason, perhaps, that we are told that Epicharis dies in her litter and strangles herself with her underwear (*Ann.* 15.57). Although the death of Petronius is not explicitly called an *exemplum*, and we are not even told that it is admirable in any way, we are surely supposed to respect the integrity of a hedonist who takes his own life in the most relaxed and pleasurable way possible, at the same time protecting others (*Ann.* 16.18–19). It may be, too, that Lucan to some extent redeems himself, after betraying his own mother, by dying as the proud author of a great poem (*Ann.* 15.70). Like Seneca, again, Tacitus seems to have thought that a good death could outweigh earlier moral failure.¹¹⁷

The Neronian books are to some extent a special case, since Tacitus' sources seem to have included a partisan biography of Thrasea and the works of Seneca himself, as well as Stoic accounts of the the deaths of prominent men.¹¹⁸ But Tacitus reveals a similar preoccupation with *exempla* in the introduction to his *Histories*. His subject matter, he tells us, required descriptions of terrible events, and of despicable behavior at all levels of society (*Hist.* 1.2), but that was not all:

114. For *ego me bene habeo* ("I'm doing very well") see the account of Metellus Scipio in Sen. *EM.* 24.9, discussed above, section 2.2.

115. Tac. *Ann.* 15.49; 15.70; cf. 16.16.

116. Above, section 2.2.

117. Above, section 2.4. See also the death of Otho, discussed at the end of this paper.

118. Marx 1937/38; Ronconi 1940; Bellardi 1974; Sage 1990: 1016–17.

Non tamen adeo virtutum sterile saeculum, ut non et bona exempla proderit. comitatae profugos liberos matres, secutae maritos in exilia coniuges; propinqui audentes, constantes generi, contumax etiam adversus tormenta servorum fides; supremae clarorum virorum necessitates, ipsa necessitas fortiter tolerata et laudatis antiquorum mortibus pares exitus.

Tac. *Hist.* 1.3.1

But the age were was not so barren of virtues that it did not also produce good *exempla*. Mothers accompanied their children when they fled, wives followed their husbands into exile; relatives were steadfast, sons-in-law were stalwart, and the loyalty of slaves was strong even in the face of torture; famous men met the ultimate challenges with courage, and their deaths were the equal of those famous among the ancients.

Here Tacitus seems simply to assume that *exempla* would be something his readers expected to find in his work: he was interested in bad *exempla* as well as good ones, he could find them in surprising places (such as women and slaves), and he paid particular attention to the manner of their deaths.

Thus when a Ligurian woman refuses to betray her son she is singled out as a *praeclarum exemplum* (*Hist.* 2.13.2).¹¹⁹ And the wife of Vitellius provides an *exemplum* of restraint when she refuses to join her sister-in-law in vindictiveness (*Hist.* 2.64.2). Tacitus also promises to tell us, in its proper place, the story of how Sabinus evaded capture, about the *constantia* of Sabinus' friends, and the famous *exemplum* of his wife (*Hist.* 4.67.2). And he puts into the mouth of Curtius Montanus a striking invocation of the importance of *mala exempla*. Montanus was bitterly opposed to a proposal to go easy on Regulus for collaborating with Nero, and rejected the notion that it would be safe for Regulus to go unpunished: people who do evil and get caught are already dangerous enough, as *exempla*; what would happen if they started getting away with it?¹²⁰ And, he continues, we should not think that *mala exempla* will be harmless under a good emperor like Vespasian, because they will survive to do their evil work in less happy times.¹²¹

In the *Annals*, outside the Neronian books, Tacitus rarely identifies moral *exempla* explicitly, and when he does it is to draw attention to reprehensible behavior, by collaborators with the regime. In introducing us to the first of the odious informers so prominent in the *Annals*, Caepio Crispinus, Tacitus provides

119. Tacitus presumably heard of this incident through his family connections, see Tac. *Agr.* 7.

120. *Hist.* 4.42.5: “*retinete, patres conscripti, et reservate hominem tam expediti consilii, ut omnis aetas instructa sit, et quo modo senes nostri Marcellum, Crispum, iuvenes Regulum imitentur. invenit aemulos etiam infelix nequitia: quid si floreat vigeatque?*” “Preserve and protect, fathers, a man of such useful advice that the whole age can be edified by it, and, as just recently our elders imitated Marcellus and Crispus, let our young men imitate Regulus. Even an unsuccessful wickedness finds emulators; what will happen if wickedness is to prosper and flourish?”

121. *Hist.* 4.42.6: “*non timemus Vespasianum: ea principis aetas, ea moderatio; sed diutius durant exempla quam mores,*” “We have no fear of Vespasian, such is the emperor's age and moderation. But *exempla* last longer than anyone's morals.” Note that Wellesley 1989 reads *durant exempla quam imperatores*, which makes the same point more explicitly.

us with a thumbnail indictment of his career, which had encouraged all the other informers: Crispinus was an *exemplum* of the horrors of upward mobility, because a poor and powerless man had become rich and influential (*Ann.* 1.74.1–2). Even more loathsome was the younger Vibius Senenus, who cheerfully and eloquently prosecuted his own father for *maiestas*, thus providing an *exemplum atrox* (*Ann.* 4.28.1: “a horrifying *exemplum*”). The last in this depressing series is L. Vitellius, who despite his later reputation had under Tiberius been a good administrator; it was only later that, corrupted by his fear of Gaius and his friendship with Claudius, he was an *exemplar* of disgraceful flattery (*Ann.* 6.32.4).

Tacitus’ accounts of Seneca, Barea, and Thrasea are his most elaborate explorations of moral decision-making. But the brief accounts of others behaving in ways worthy of emulation, or the opposite, fill out the picture: the basic principles are important for all of us, whether we are Stoics or not.

5. TACITUS AND THE STOICS

I have argued that we should take Tacitus seriously when he claims that *exempla* are an important part of history. Whether or not it is helpful to think of “Stoic history,” Stoic ideas about moral teaching at least help explain why *exempla* were so useful: people often lack the insight to make the right choices, or the strength to stick to them, and reflecting on the actions of others could help on both fronts. And it is surely no coincidence that the most elaborate *exempla* in the *Annals* involve three prominent Stoics.

Tacitus is often said to have disliked Stoicism as a doctrine, and Stoics as a breed. As we have seen, some scholars see his accounts of Seneca, and even of Thrasea, as hostile; instead of stubborn opposition to the regime, it is said, Tacitus preferred the more cooperative approach of his father-in-law.¹²² Even scholars who accept that the portraits of Thrasea and Seneca are positive see Tacitus as distinguishing between their personal virtues and their doctrinal affiliation.¹²³ Certainly few would entertain the notion that Tacitus was seriously committed to Stoicism.¹²⁴

But it is worth noting that the tangible arguments advanced against Stoic sympathies are not strong. For example, the fact that Tacitus never declares an allegiance to Stoicism means little; neither Posidonius or Arrian ever identifies himself as a Stoic in what we have of their historical writing, which in Arrian’s

122. Mellor 1993: 50: “he was deeply distrustful of philosophers, and hardly derived his moral standards from philosophy.” Grilli 1995: 61: “Tacito non ama gli stoici che fanno politica; potrei anche dire che non ama i politici che s’avvolgono nel manto del stoicismo.” In general see André 1991.

123. Murray 1965: 59: “If Tacitus praised the characters of certain of the Stoics, and on occasion their actions, he did not approve of their general attitude.”

124. Syme 1958: 527n.1 is noncommittal and uninterested: “If many features in the make-up of Tacitus (as of other educated Romans) be described as ‘Stoic,’ that does not take one very far, or very deep.”

case at least is substantial. And it is equally inconclusive that Tacitus at times voices distinctly un-Stoic doubts about the beneficence of Providence: Stoics were remarkably tolerant of human frailty, including their own, and similar doubts appear in both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.¹²⁵ Tacitus' views about fate, fortune, and the gods have been much discussed, but it is sufficient here to recall that he seems to assume that history involves the unrolling of a divine plan; his emphasis on predictions that come true, even astrological ones, suggests that his questioning of Providence is more rhetorical strategy than serious theological speculation.¹²⁶

It should go without saying that Tacitus' contempt for Publius Egnatius, the Stoic poseur, does not suggest hostility to the real thing.¹²⁷ Nor need we be troubled by Tacitus' reservations about devoting one's life to philosophy. Agricola, he says, would have gone in for it with an unbecoming intensity, had it not been for his mother's restraining influence (*Agr.* 4.3). But such moderation, and the attention to what was appropriate to a given station in life, is something that plenty of Stoics (at least the Roman ones) would have applauded, and Marcus explicitly says that he was thankful he had resisted the temptations of philosophy.¹²⁸

It is this Stoic emphasis on the differences in our circumstances that offers a possible approach to Tacitus' famous outburst near the end of the *Agricola*, about the difference between productive collaboration and futile resistance. Tacitus wrote his biography to show how a man might live a useful and even glorious life under an emperor as oppressive as Domitian; Agricola of course is one of Tacitus' most important *exempla*, even if he is never called one. But Tacitus also considers alternatives:

sciant, quibus moris est illicita mirari, posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse, obsequiumque ac modestiam, si industria et vigor adsint, eo laudis excedere, quo plerique per abrupta sed in nullum rei publicae usum ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt.

Agr. 42.4

Let it be clear to those who insist on admiring disobedience that even under bad emperors men can be great, and that a decent regard for authority, if backed by industry and energy, can reach that peak of distinction which most men attain only by following a perilous course, winning fame, without benefiting their country, by an ostentatious self-martyrdom. (Mattingly's translation)

Many scholars have understood this as a rejection of the Stoics who had been so conspicuous in their opposition to Domitian.¹²⁹ If so, we are faced with two

125. Sen. *Cons. Helv.* 8.3; *EM.* 16.5; M. Ant. 2.11.

126. See, in general, Theiler 1946; Scott 1968; Davies 2004.

127. Tac. *Ann.* 16.32.3, discussed above, section 4.1. Seneca reveals a similar hostility to professed Stoics who give the sect a bad name: *EM.* 123.15.

128. M. Ant. 1.17; see also Sen. *Helv.* 17.4; Epict. 1.22.18.

129. e.g. Furneaux 1922: ad loc. and introd. xxx. Shotter 1991: 3270: "That the *plerique* were men like the Stoic Helvidius Priscus can hardly be doubted: of course Tacitus admired their

choices: either our reading of the Neronian narrative is implausible, or else Tacitus simply changed his mind, and came to admire the confrontational approach to tyranny that he rejected in his first years as a historian. But Stoic thought suggests that in fact there is no contradiction at all. The Stoics recognized that we are not all constituted alike, and that our circumstances can be very different. Thræsea offered a valid response to tyranny, and Agricola offered another one. Indeed Tacitus has Arruntius make much the same point: *non eadem omnibus decora* (*Ann.* 6.48.1: “different people have different ways of distinguishing themselves”).

In Tacitus’ view, then, it was right for some people to resist and for others to cooperate, and his outburst about Agricola should be read with this in mind. He was certainly not hostile to authentic Stoic heroes; not the least of Domitian’s outrages, he says, was his attempt to destroy all copies of the biographies of Thræsea and Helvidius (*Agr.* 2.1). Rather, he has no patience for the people who talked mindlessly about such men when they, and the tyrants, were long gone.¹³⁰ Such people needed reminding that in some circumstances resistance was not the appropriate option.

If we consciously resist the temptation to read the passage as a condemnation, it can appear very different:

Let it be clear to those who so regularly¹³¹ praise resistance¹³² that even under bad emperors men can be great, and that a decent regard for authority, if backed by industry and energy, can reach that peak of distinction where most men, after choices that were perilous but had little effect on the state,¹³³ gained renown by a resolute death.¹³⁴

bravery and their adherence to their principles even though he evidently regarded those principles as mistaken: for in the last analysis, what did they achieve beyond their own martyrdom?”

130. So, rightly, Birley 1999: ad loc; see also Syme 1958: 25: “Tacitus proclaims his scorn for the brave enemies of dead tyrants, the noisy advocates of the heroes and martyrs.”

131. *quibus moris est*. Translations such as “make a habit of,” or “insist on” (Mattingly 1970) convey a sense of disapproval, but there is nothing about the Latin itself that suggests this; the phrase can mean simply “those people who regularly do something.”

132. *inlicita mirari*. It is tempting to read this as a condemnation, since admiration for illegality at first looks distinctly immoral. But scholars agree that *inlicita* means not “things that are illegal” in the traditional sense (and certainly not “things that are immoral”), but rather “things that the emperor has decided should be prohibited.”

133. *per abrupta sed in nullum rei publicae usum*. This is the crucial phrase. As with the comment on Thræsea’s reaction to the murder of Agrippina (*Ann.* 14.12.1; see above, section 4.1), it is tempting to understand Tacitus as claiming that opposition is not only dangerous but unhelpful. But it is possible that *in nullum rei publicae usum* is not as judgmental as it might appear. In the first place, *usus* is not the same as *utilitas*. Whereas *utilitas* is unambiguously positive, like our word “utility,” *usus* can mean simply that something is being used; contrast Cic. *Off.* 3.30: *qui multam utilitatem rei publicae . . . afferre possis* (“you who are able to be very useful to the state”) with Tac. *Hist.* 4.60: *quae profana foedaque in usum necessitas vertit* (“which [animals] low and foul necessity turned to use”). Second, we should remember that failure is not necessarily the fault of the person who fails. As at *Ann.* 14.12.1, on Thræsea’s walking out of the Senate, Tacitus may mean that glorious deeds *should* have been useful, but weren’t (above, n. 94).

134. *ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt*. We tend to read *ambitiosa* as distinctly hostile, casting doubt on the sincerity of the resistance and thus on their fame. But we should remember that *inclarresco* and

The fact that the resistance of the Stoics was not often emulated by others is certainly a crucial point, and was no doubt one reason Tacitus was so interested in an alternative. But for Tacitus, as for the Stoics themselves, the question of practical effectiveness was of secondary importance. If observers could not profit from the example of people like Thræsea, that was perhaps disappointing, but it did not diminish their glory. Later generations might do better.

6. CONCLUSION

Not all *exempla*, of course, had to be labeled; Tacitus' narrative abounds in characters whose behaviors make them worthy of imitation or censure, or who offer useful material for moral reflection.¹³⁵ Of all these "unidentified" *exempla* one of the most illuminating is Marcus Lepidus, singled out by Tacitus as a man able to negotiate the perils of friendship with an emperor and use his position for the common good:

hunc ego Lepidum temporibus illis gravem et sapientem virum fuisse comperior: nam pleraque ab saevis adulationibus aliorum in melius flexit. neque tamen temperamenti egebat, cum aequabili auctoritate et gratia apud Tiberium vigerit. unde dubitare cogor, fato et sorte nascendi, ut cetera, ita principum inclinatio in hos, offensio in illos, an sit aliquid in nostris consiliis liceatque inter abruptam contumaciam et deforme obsequium pergere iter ambitione ac periculis vacuum.

Ann. 4.20.2–3

I find that this Lepidus was, in those times, a serious and wise man: for he turned most of the things stemming from the savage fawning of others into something better. But he was also not without tact, and could flourish with his moral authority unimpaired and the approval of Tiberius. Which compels me to wonder whether it is fate and the random chances of birth, as with other things, that causes emperors to favor some people and to be hostile to others, or whether this rests to some extent on our own decisions, and whether it is not possible to tread a path between obnoxious obstinacy and disgraceful submission, free from ambition and its dangers.

Like the *Agricola*, this raises what is perhaps the most important issue in Tacitus: it was not always easy, under the principate, to know what to do. Certain behaviors, of course, were obviously admirable, and others were obviously reprehensible, and could usefully offer inspiration or deterrence. But most Romans were in a much more equivocal position: resistance might in some circumstances be unavoidable,

claritas, like *gloria*, are unambiguously positive words. And *ambitosus* need not imply that the death in question is self-interested and hypocritical; the word can mean simply "resolute."

135. For *exempla* without labels see e.g. Tac. *Hist.* 1.43; 4.42.5; *Ann.* 1.53; 1.74; 2.34; 2.40; 3.49; 3.50; 11.12.

and therefore right, but sometimes collaboration might be more helpful. Tacitus' job as a historian was, as he saw it, to provide a range of *exempla*: his readers could reflect on the *exempla*, good and bad, to help them figure out what they ought to do.

Tacitus has more to say about this question in another digression on the nature of his subject (*Ann.* 4.32.2–4.33.2). Apologizing for the apparently trivial nature of the events he is reporting, he admits that compared to the Roman past his own material is simply inferior. But, he continues, even events that seem trivial at first sight can actually turn out to be important, because in the end they can help us deal with the emperors. In former times, when the state had been under the control of first the People and then the Senate, the key to success had been an understanding of each of those political groups. But in his own day the situation was completely different:

sic converso statu neque alia rerum <salute> quam si unus imperitet,
haec conquiri tradique in rem fuerit, quia pauci prudentia honesta ab
deterioribus, utilia ab noxiis discernunt, plures aliorum eventis docentur.

Ann. 4.33.2

Now that things have changed and the only safety is if one person is in charge, it will be useful to investigate these things and to report them, since few people have the innate wisdom to distinguish good things from bad ones, and useful things from harmful ones: most people learn this from events that happen to others.

Once again Tacitus has connected his goals as a historian with an educational mission. Understanding relationships with emperors is the key to success in a monarchy, and the key to making the monarchy a success. And since most people need help, a historian can usefully provide guidance in identifying what is good and what is not.

Whether Tacitus imagined that emperors themselves would profit from his *exempla* is less clear. Emperors were the most obvious people to learn from Tacitus' explorations of the imperial character, to be inspired or deterred by the thought that historians were there to preserve their memory. But Tacitus is certainly not explicit about this, whether because it would have been tactless or because his real interest was in the influence on emperors exerted by other people. In what may be pure professional fantasy, however, he does present Otho as concerned in defeat with how future generations will remember him: in removing himself from the scene, for the good of others, he will be yet another *exemplum* (*Hist.* 2.47.2).

Historical writing for exemplary purposes is not much to the modern taste. It goes against the grain to place Tacitus in the company of a notorious moralizer like Mason Locke Weems, who wrote his famous biography of George Washington so that children could emulate his private virtues along with his public ones: "Give

us his private virtues! In these, every youth is interested, because in these every youth may become a Washington.”¹³⁶

But *exempla* are more interesting and more effective than we usually think. Even the famous cherry tree *exemplum*, apparently invented by “Parson” Weems for the edification of American youth, makes a serious point about the trust that can exist between a father and a son, and could in theory prompt useful reflection.¹³⁷ Tacitus was writing in a more difficult political environment, for readers who might have to make decisions about how to deal with tyranny. Rightly or wrongly, he thought that *exempla* would help.

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136. Weems 1858: 9.

137. Weems 1858: 14–16. The story is better known in an abbreviated and morally simplistic form; see Wills 1984: 52–53.

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