

Exemplarity: Beyond Intertextuality

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“A remarkable – and perhaps true – story” (Wellesley 2000: 161)

Both Suetonius and Tacitus relate the same striking exemplary anecdote about an episode that took place in the turmoil of 69 CE, during the civil wars that unfolded between the death of Galba on 15th January and the death of Vitellius in mid-December. A comparison between the differently contextualised versions of the story provided by these two authors provides this paper with its starting point for exploring the questions of how written Latin texts engage with the extra-textual culture of Roman exemplarity and whether there is something particular to the post-Flavian period about Suetonius’ and Tacitus’ mode of engagement with exemplarity.

The anecdote in question is the story of a brave and loyal soldier who falls on his sword as a means of sending an emphatic message to his emperor; he sacrifices his own life in order to persuade his leader of the veracity of the report that he has just delivered about the dire military situation which they are in, and his words and action subsequently sting his leader into action. Tacitus relates the story in his *Histories* (Tac. *Hist.* 3.54) and Suetonius relates it in his biography of the short-reigning emperor Otho (Suet. *Oth.* 10). It is a story that participates in a long tradition of exempla and of exemplary and ethical thinking in ancient Rome. Its narrative mobilises traditional motifs relating both to military intelligence and to *devotio* and self-sacrifice. Both Tacitus and Suetonius tell the story in the form of an exemplum – a short, snappy, morally-charged narrative – and in each case the story contributes to the author’s overarching treatment of exemplarity as a Roman tradition that has been severely affected by the transition from Republic to Empire.

However, what is striking is that each author places this story at a different moment in this story of the Year of the Four Emperors - for Suetonius it happens in the spring of 69, for Tacitus in the autumn - and in a different setting, with different protagonists. Indeed, the story unfolds in opposing camps: in Suetonius’s account the emperor in question is Otho, in Tacitus’ it is Vitellius.

In Suetonius’ biography, this anecdote appears as part of his account of the unexpectedly heroic death of Otho, and it also represents an unusual moment of moral optimism and redemption within a series of imperial biographies notable for their morally bleak outlook. In April 69, Otho’s army has been defeated at Bedriacum by Vitellius’ troops, and a soldier arrives to bring him news of the defeat; the messenger is not believed, and so to prove the truth of his announcement, he kills himself before Otho’s eyes. Not only does this convince the emperor, but it also directs his next and final moves in two respects: first it convinces him of the virtue of his men, which leads him to want to spare them further suffering in civil war, and second it provides him with a model of swift and courageous death which he is quick to take up:

tunc ac despiciendam vitam exemplo manipularis militis concitatum, qui cum cladem exercitus nuntiaret nec cuiquam fidem faceret ac nunc mendaci nunc timoris, quasi fugisset ex acie argueretur, gladio ante pedes eius incubuerit. Hoc viso proclamasse cum aiebat, non amplius se in periculum talis tamque bene meritos coniecturum.

“Then he was spurred on to despise life by the example of a common soldier: when this man had announced the defeat of the army, and no one would believe him, and he was accused first of lying and then of cowardice as if he had fled from the battle field, he fell upon his sword at Otho’s feet. [My father] used to say that at this sight Otho declared that he would no longer endanger the lives of such men who were so well deserving.” (Suet. *Otho* 10).

This exemplary deed of a common soldier inspires Otho to his own act of heroism, and in the subsequent scene the emperor takes his own life, calmly and courageously in the manner of a Catonian Stoic. The passage stands out among Suetonius’ imperial biographies as the only passage in which an exemplary act hits its mark. The story is also lent historical authenticity by Suetonius’ claim that it was related to him (often) by his own father, who served in this war himself (*interfuit huic bello pater meus Suetonius Laetus, tertiae decimae legionis tribunus angusticlavius. is mox referre crebro solebat...*Suet. *Otho* 10).

This Suetonian authentication makes it all the more notable that in Tacitus’ *Histories* the story appears in an entirely different historical context. Here it is part of the story, several months later, of the downfall of the appalling Vitellius, and adds to his characterisation as a man who is unable to face the reality of his situation after his own defeat at Cremona, and willing to repress any attempts to reveal the truth. In Tacitus’ account the hero of the story is the centurion Julius Agrestis, a figure of loyalty and steadfastness, who persuades Vitellius to allow him to visit the enemy’s camp and the battlefield to ascertain the situation. On his return, as in Suetonius’ version, the emperor refuses to believe his bad news, and once again the messenger must prove the truth of his announcement by taking his own life:

Agrestis ad Vitellium remeavit abnuentique vera esse quae adferret, atque ultro corruptum arguenti 'quandoquidem' inquit 'magno documento opus est, nec alius iam tibi aut vitae aut mortis meae usus, dabo cui credas.' atque ita digressus voluntaria morte dicta firmavit.

“Agrestis travelled back to Vitellius, and when the latter refused to accept the truth of the news he brought and even accused him of bribery he said: “Since a weighty proof is needed, and you now have no further use for either my life or my death, I will give you something you can believe.” And taking his leave he confirmed his words by killing himself,” (Tac. *Hist.* 3.54).

The simple question at the heart of this paper is: why? Why do these two authors, writing at roughly the same time and about the same subject, include the same story, but integrate it so differently in their accounts and, in particular, situate it in entirely different contexts? And further, what is the significance of the repetition of the same narrative structure, but with such clear divergence of detail and context? How should we understand the relationship between the two texts under examination? What kind of intertextuality is at work here?

i) Imperial exemplarity

I will start by examining what it is about this particular exemplary tale that seized the imagination of both Suetonius and Tacitus, and what their different deployment of it can tell us about the literary and moral cultures of the period in which they wrote. I will explore the significance of the way that the motif of heroic self-sacrifice (so central to the

Roman exemplary tradition) is reworked in this particular story, how it draws on and engages earlier renditions of the motif in Roman exemplary culture. I will discuss the new imperial emphases to be found in this new version, as it plays out in the works of Suetonius and Tacitus, and how this story, in its two different guises, reflects and engages with the ideological preoccupations of the period.

ii) Beyond intertextuality:

Drawing on recent scholarship on cultural memory, folklore and urban myth, I will then pursue the question of the relationship between the two texts, and use this as a starting point for a discussion of the broader cultural context of the period, in which compelling exemplary stories circulated and evolved as a form of cultural memory that transcended their textual existence (but also framed, nurtured and responded to written exempla). This broader context can help to explain how a single story can turn up in two rather different “historical” versions in the works of two contemporary writers. But this also raises the question of how the fact that the same narrative structure is applied to two very different episodes in the two authors affects its plausibility as a real-life event or its claims to moral truth. I shall explore how exemplary motifs, like schemata of cultural traditions and folklore, act as what theorists of cultural memory call “premediations” that shape the way not only that historians represent the past, but also the way that individuals experience the world.