

DECUS POSTERITAS REPENDIT:
Reevaluating Cremutius Cordus in Tacitus' *Annals*

By
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Abstract

In one of the best known passages in the *Annals*, Tacitus gives an account of the trial and death of Aulus Cremutius Cordus (A. 4.34-35), a Roman historian documenting the transitional period from the Roman Republic to the Empire. In this account Cordus is given a speech with which he defends a historian's right to praise the enemies of the emperor. The majority of modern scholars have interpreted Tacitus' account as unqualified praise for Cordus, and many have suggested that readers are to understand Cordus as a surrogate for Tacitus' own views on the rights and duties of historians. In this project I attempt to challenge that consensus. I argue that Cordus and Tacitus disagree in their historiographical, political, and even moral principles, and that Tacitus' account of Cordus' trial and death contains criticism of the historian, even while acknowledging his courage. This reading complicates Tacitus' relationship to Cordus and to several other characters in the *Annals* who, though they die deaths of great renown, effect little change.

To argue for ideological differences between Cordus and Tacitus I take a circuitous first step by examining mentions of Cordus and his historical works in other ancient writers. Modern praise for Cordus has conditioned readers of the *Annals* to expect that he was universally respected by the ancient authors, but this project shows that opinions about him were divided. This division is epitomized by the differences between the accounts of Suetonius and Seneca the Younger. I argue that Tacitus is closer to Suetonius than Seneca in his feelings towards Cordus; Tacitus and Suetonius both distrust historians with strong partisan (i.e., Republican) beliefs, and Cordus, I show, is yoked by both to such historians. Seneca praises Cordus mainly for his willingness to die for his beliefs, but this very willingness—eagerness even—to die for personal vindication and glory is a quality that Tacitus believes a flaw in several characters in his histories

including, I argue, Seneca himself in the account of his suicide (A. 15.62-64). Tacitus' criticism for this quality in Seneca, which Tacitus diagnoses as the readiness to die an "ostentatious death" (*ambitiosa mors*, *Agr.* 42.4-5), informs, in my final section, my examination of Tacitus' account of the trial and death of Cordus. Importantly, Tacitus' depiction of Cordus follows directly after a digression in which Tacitus discusses his own historiographical and political views, and I point out that elements of this digression and of the account of Cordus can be compared to show significant differences between the two historians.

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I. Introduction

Aulus Cremutius Cordus was a Roman historian whose (no longer extant) work of history, composed in the annalistic style, recounted, among other things, the civil wars of the 1st c. BCE. The fact that this work praised Brutus and called Cassius “the last of the Romans,” along with certain disparaging comments Cordus made in the senate against Sejanus, brought the anger of the imperial inner circle down upon him. He was tried under the *lex maiestatis*, the Roman law dealing with treason, in 25 CE, the eleventh year of Tiberius’ reign, but committed suicide by starvation before a verdict could be declared.

The most famous account of Cordus’ death is found in Book 4 of Tacitus’ *Annals*, though other accounts do exist. His appearance in Tacitus is remarkable for two reasons: in the *Annals* alone is Cordus provided a speech in which he defends his work (A. 4.34.2-35.3); second, Tacitus places Cordus’ speech directly after an extended digression about his own thoughts on the purpose of history and about his historiographical methods (A. 4.32.1-33.4)—I will refer to this section henceforth as Tacitus’ excursus on historiography. Many scholars have believed, and do believe, that the juxtaposition of the excursus on historiography and Cordus’ speech indicates an effort by Tacitus to show a relationship between himself and Cordus in terms of their views on writing history. The precise nature of this relationship, as interpreted by scholars and myself, will be considered below. But before discussing these matters, I have reproduced below the Latin text and an English translation of the entirety of the excursus on historiography and Cordus’ speech (A. 4.32-35).¹ Their many intricacies will not be immediately examined, but reading the excursus and the speech will provide needed context to begin this project.

¹ All translations are my own. Please consult the bibliography for the editions of text used.

Latin Text of the Excursus on Historiography and Cordus' Speech (A. 4.32-35)

[32] *pleraque eorum, quae rettuli quaeque referam, parua forsitan et leuia memoratu uideri non nescius sum, sed nemo annales nostros cum scriptura eorum contenderit, qui ueteres populi Romani res composuere, ingentia illi bella, expugnationes urbium, fusos captosque reges, aut si quando ad interna praeuerterent, discordias consulum aduersum tribunos, agrarias frumentariasque leges, plebis et optimatum certamina libero egressu memorabant: [32.2] nobis in arto et inglorius labor, immota quippe aut modice lacessita pax, maestae urbis res et princeps proferendi imperi incuriosus erat. non tamen sine usu fuerit introspicere illa primo aspectu leuia, ex quis magnarum saepe rerum motus oriuntur.*

[33] *Nam cunctas nationes et urbes populus aut primores aut singuli regunt. delecta ex iis et conflata rei publicae forma laudari facilius quam euenire, uel si euenit, haud diuturna esse potest. [33.2] igitur ut olim, plebe ualida, uel cum patres pollerent, noscenda uulgi natura, et quibus modis temperanter haberetur, senatusque et optimatum ingenia qui maxime perdidicerant, callidi temporum et sapientes credebantur, sic conuerso statu, neque alia re Rom<ana>, quam si unus imperitet, haec conquiri tradique in rem fuerit, quia pauci prudentia honesta ab deterioribus, utilia ab noxiis discernunt, plures aliorum euentis docentur.*

[33.3] *ceterum ut profutura, ita minimum oblectationis adferunt. nam situs gentium, uarietates proeliorum, clari ducum exitus retinent ac redintegrant legentium animum: nos saeua iussa, continuas accusationes, fallaces amicitias, perniciem innocentium et easdem exitii causas coniungimus, obuia rerum similitudine et satietate. [33.4] tum, quod antiquis scriptoribus rarus obtrectator, neque refert cuiusquam, Punicas Romanasque acies laetius extuleris: at multorum, qui Tiberio regente poenam uel infamias subiere, posterii manent, utque familiae ipsae iam extinctae sint, reperies, qui ob similitudinem morum aliena malefacta sibi obiectari putent. etiam gloria ac uitus infensos habet, ut nimis ex propinquo diuersa arguens. sed a<d i>ncepta redeo.*

[34] *Cornelio Cosso Asinio Agrippa consulibus Cremutius Cordus postulatur nouo ac tunc primum audito crimine, quod editis annalibus laudatoque M. Bruto C. Cassium Romanorum ultimum dixisset. accusabant Satrius Secundus et Pinarius Natta, Seiani clientes. [34.2] id perniciabile reo et Caesar truci uultu defensionem accipiens, quam Cremutius, relinquendae uitae certus, in hunc modum exorsus est:*

“uerba mea, patres conscripti, arguuntur, adeo factorum innocens sum. sed neque haec in principem aut principis parentem, quos lex maiestatis amplectitur: Brutum et Cassium laudauisse dicor, quorum res gestas cum plurimi composuerint, nemo sine honore memorauit. [34.3] Titus Liuius, eloquentiae ac fidei praeclarus in primis, Cn. Pompeium tantis laudibus tulit, ut Pompeianum eum Augustus appellaret, neque id amicitiae eorum offecit. Scipionem,

Afranium, hunc ipsum Cassium, hunc Brutum nusquam latrones et parricidas, quae nunc uocabula inponuntur, saepe ut insignis uiros nominat.

[34.4] *Asinii Pollionis scripta egregiam eorundem memoriam tradunt, Messalla Coruinus imperatorem suum Cassium praedicabat, et uterque opibusque atque honoribus peruigere. Marci Ciceronis libro, quo Catonem caelo aequauit, quid aliud dictator Caesar quam rescripta oratione, uelut apud iudices, respondit? [34.5] Antonii epistulae, Bruti contiones falsa quidem in Augustum probra, sed multa cum acerbitate habent; carmina Bibaculi et Catulli referta contumeliis Caesarum leguntur, sed ipse diuus Iulius, ipse diuus Augustus et tulere ista et reliquere, haud facile dixerim, moderatione magis an sapientia. namque spreta exolescunt: si irascere, adgnita uidentur.*

[35] *non attingo Graecos, quorum non modo libertas, etiam libido impunita; aut si quis advertit, dictis dicta ultus est. sed maxime solutum et sine obtrectatore fuit prodere de iis, quos mors odio aut gratiae exemisset. [35.2] num enim armatis Cassio et Bruto ac Philippenses campos obtinentibus belli ciuilis causa populum per contiones incendo? an illi quidem septuagesimum ante annum perempti, quo modo imaginibus suis noscuntur, quas ne uictor quidem aboleuit, sic partem memoriae apud scriptores retinent? [35.3] suum cuique decus posteritas rependit, nec derunt, si damnatio ingruit, qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, sed etiam mei meminerint.”*

[35.4] *egressus dein senatu uitam abstinentia finiuit. libros per aediles cremandos censuere patres, et manserunt occultati et editi. [35.5] quo magis socordiam eorum inridere libet, qui praesenti potentia credunt extingui posse etiam sequentis aeui memoriam. nam contra punitis ingeniis gliscit auctoritas, neque aliud externi reges, aut qui eadem saeuitia usi sunt, nisi dedecus sibi atque illis gloriam peperere.*

Translation of the Excursus on Historiography and Cordus' Speech

[32] That much of the things that I have reported and that I will report seem insignificant, perhaps, and unworthy of remembrance, I am not unaware. But no one should compare my annals with the writing of those who described the ancient deeds of the Roman people. For those historians huge wars, the takings of cities, routed and captured kings, or when they turned to domestic matters, the disagreements of consuls against tribunes, land and welfare laws, contests between plebs and “best men” were the subjects of memory, with freedom to elaborate: [32.2] for me the work is narrow and inglorious: the peace was unmoved or modestly excited, the affairs of the city mournful, and the emperor unconcerned with extending imperial strength. However, it will not be without use to examine those things, unworthy at first glance, from which the movements of great things often arise.

[33] For in all lands and cities either the people or the leading men or an individual rules. (A form of government selected and conflated from these can be more easily praised than be able to come about, or, if one does come about, can hardly be able to last.) [33.2] Therefore, just as once, when the plebs were vigorous or when the senators were in power, one had to know the nature of the masses and in what ways they could be kept in moderation, and those who had the most thorough understanding of the talents of the senate and “best men” were believed to be clever and intelligent about their times, so too with a change of government and with no other recourse for the safety of state than that one-man should rule,² it may be useful for these things to be investigated and handed down, because few men discern the wise and honorable from the meaner, the useful from the harmful, and more are taught by the outcomes of others.

[33.3] But though they are helpful, they provide little pleasure. For the locations of peoples, the vicissitudes of battles and the famous ends of leaders hold and refresh readers' minds: I join together brutal commands, endless accusations, false friendships, the destruction of innocents and the ever-same reasons for ruin—I am constantly confronted with the sameness of events. Then, there's the fact that there is hardly an objector to the writers of old, nor does it concern anyone whether one praises more highly the battle lines of the Carthaginians or the Romans: but the descendants of many of those who underwent punishment or dishonor during Tiberius' reign remain, and though the families themselves have now been wiped out, you will find people who believe that the bad deeds of others are being imputed on to them on account of a sameness in character. Even glory and virtue has its detractors, as if too nearly arguing their opposites. But I return to the matters at hand.

² For the use of *si* in this passage as a subordinating conjunction for a substantive clause and its near equivalence to *ut* here cf. Martin and Woodman (1989) 173-174.

[34] Cornelius Cossus and Asinius Agrippa consuls. Cremutius Cordus was prosecuted for a new and then first heard charge, that, with annals published and M. Brutus praised, he had called C. Cassius the last of the Romans. His accusers were Satrius Secundus and Pinarius Natta, Sejanus' clients. [34.2] This proved ruinous for the defendant, as did Caesar's grim appearance while listening to the defense speech, which Cremutius, set on abandoning his life, began in this way:

"My words, senators, are disputed, that's how innocent I am of deeds. But these words have been directed towards neither the emperor nor the emperor's parent, whom the treason law covers: I am said to have praised Brutus and Cassius, about whose accomplishments many have written and no one has recalled without honor. [34.3] Titus Livy, among the most brilliant in eloquence and loyalty, gave Pompey such praises that Augustus dubbed him a Pompeian, and this did not affect their friendship. Scipio, Afranius, this very Cassius, this Brutus, nowhere does he call them bandits or traitors (these are the labels now imposed), but he often calls them distinguished men.

[34.4] Asinius Pollio's writings pass down an outstanding memory of these same men, Messalla Corvinus used to declare Cassius his commander, and both these men thrived in wealth and honors. In response to Marcus Cicero's book, in which he lifted Cato to the sky, what else did Caesar do as dictator than write a speech, as if before a jury? [34.5] Antony's letters, Brutus' speeches, definitely false and slanderous towards Augustus, are very bitter. The poems of Bibaculus and Catullus are filled with invectives against the Caesars, but the divine Julius and Augustus both bore and left them alone, I cannot say with more moderation or wisdom. For things, once spurned, disappear; if one grows angry, they seem acknowledged.

[35] I am not talking about the Greeks, not only whose freedom of speech, but even pleasure are unpunished; if anyone cared, he avenged words with words. But things were very lax and no one objected to writing about those whom death had released from hate or gratitude. [35.2] For, by portraying Cassius and Brutus armed and holding the fields of Philippi, am I firing up the people for civil war through assemblies? Or do not those men, seventy years dead, just as they are recognized by their images, which not even the victor [i.e., Augustus] abolished, thus keep a share of memory in writers? [35.3] Posterity reevaluates each person's worth, and there will be those, if conviction comes, who remember not only Cassius and Brutus, but even me.

[35.4] Having left the senate, he ended his life with starvation. The books had to be burned by the aediles, senators decreed, but they remained hidden and published. [35.5] All the more pleasing is it to mock the stupidity of those who believe that with present power even the following age's memory can be extinguished. On the contrary, the authority of punished geniuses grows, and foreign kings or those who practice like savagery prepare nothing but dishonor for themselves and glory for the dead.

Ia. The Cordus Consensus

As I began to say above, much has been made about the striking fact that Tacitus juxtaposes the excursus on historiography with the only appearance of a historian as a historical figure himself in the *Annals*.³ There is certainly some importance to such a conscious compositional decision—it is implausible that the two episodes could have been so placed by accident. The ultimate focus of this project is to make clear what point Tacitus is trying to make by (re)producing Cordus’ speech immediately after presenting his own thoughts on historiography, and to show what this speech indicates about Tacitus’ feelings toward Cordus.

Addressing these questions will require some preliminary words. I would first like to begin with the historicity of Tacitus’ account of Cordus’ speech. Syme concluded that this speech “is all Tacitus,” and this conclusion, with its “all”-inclusive vagueness, is often repeated in Tacitean scholarship.⁴ I agree with Syme’s sentiment, but I should qualify to what extent that I do believe Cordus’ speech “is all Tacitus.” Rather, I begin first with something I do not believe about Cordus’ speech, that it is “all Tacitus” in the sense that Tacitus has invented it out of whole cloth. But whether he did so or not has little bearing on why he chose to include the speech in the *Annals* and why he chose such a remarkable position for it. If this speech does have a basis in historical fact, we must remember that the ancient historian deemed it quite acceptable both to emphasize certain aspects of a speech that are especially pertinent to his narrative and thematic interests, and to present the original speaker’s thoughts in a language and style that is entirely his

³ Recent studies include the following: Woodman (1988), Martin and Woodman (1989), Moles (1998), McHugh (2004), Edwards (2007), Damon (2010), Wisse (2013), Strunk (2017).

⁴ Syme (1958) 337; Martin and Woodman (1989) 178, Moles (1998) 138.

own. The fortunate survival of the Lyon Tablet shows—as much as one example can—that Tacitus employed both techniques.⁵

If, however, Tacitus did invent any part or aspect of Cordus' speech, it seems all the more likely that its content was crafted specifically as a response to his excursus on historiography. Since nothing of Cordus' writings exists save fragments preserved in the writings of other authors we neither have any way of corroborating the substance of Tacitus' account nor of refuting it. It may very well be the case that the content of the speech was “all Cordus,” in that the thoughts and feelings expressed in this speech really were, or were similar to, those expressed by Cordus. And yet we can be confident that the speech's internal organization, language, points of emphasis, and, finally, the position of the speech in the *Annals* can be rightly described as “all Tacitus.” Therefore, the question whether Tacitus invented this speech out of whole cloth is immaterial to understanding the purpose of this speech in relation to the section preceding it.

A far more productive line of inquiry is to question to what extent the opinions expressed by Cordus' speech concerning the writing of history align with Tacitus' own. The leading consensus by scholars interested in this section of the *Annals* claims that Tacitus is, so to speak,

⁵ Although Tacitus is generally faithful to the content of Claudius' speech in A. 11.24, the omission of certain details mentioned in the Lyon Tablet, such as the discussion of the evolution of Rome's political structure and the digression on Vienne, shows that Tacitus is selective as to what to include in his version of the speech. Moreover, it appears that Tacitus altered the context of the speech in order to tailor it to his interests. In the first non-fragmentary section of the Lyon Tablet Claudius appears to be introducing a new subject matter to the senate (*deprecor, ne quasi nouam istam rem **introduci** exhorrescatis*), whereas in Tacitus' speech Claudius addresses specific arguments of an ongoing debate (*his atque talibus haud permotus princeps et statim contra disseruit et uocato senatu ita exorsus est*, 11.24.1). The last of these arguments harkens to historical memory in order to recall the past animosity between Gaul and Rome. The fact that Claudius ends his speech in Tacitus' version by using historical precedents to defend his position demonstrates that Tacitus' thematic interests have influenced the composition of this speech. For a more detailed discussion of the comparison between the Lyon Tablet text and Tacitus, cf. Griffin (1982).

preaching his own beliefs through Cordus, his “surrogate historian,”⁶ and that Tacitus sees his own historiographical project as a successor to that of Cordus in its spirit of rebellion and fearless opposition to autocratic rule. This consensus, which makes a free speech martyr out of Cordus, has given him many modern admirers. Syme, still the authoritative voice in Tacitean scholarship, praises him as a mouthpiece for a “magnificent argument for liberty of speech.”⁷ In its most recent form, this interpretation has been argued by Moles, who sums up the Cordus presented in the *Annals* as being “on several levels Tacitus’ *alter ego*,” and by Wisse, who says that Tacitus, through the voice of Cordus, declares “a historian’s freedom to write as he thinks fit.”⁸

Ib. Opposing Views

Two recent scholars have strayed slightly from this consensus. Woodman believes that there may be some differences between the political goals that each author attempts to achieve through their histories,⁹ but he ultimately withholds a final judgment about the alignment of Tacitus’ and

⁶ Edwards (2007) 139. Perhaps more than any other scholar, her views are very strongly oriented towards “seeing Cordus as standing for Tacitus himself” (140).

⁷ Syme (1963) 546.

⁸ Moles (1998) 152. Wisse (2013) 324. The “several levels” mentioned by Moles are the similarities that he believed Tacitus and Cordus shared. They are similar, “inasmuch as the situations of Cordus and Tacitus are parallel and Cordus himself is Tacitus’ historiographical precursor” (142).

⁹ Martin and Woodman (1989) 183 believe that there may be some disingenuousness in Cordus’ arguments that his histories ought not to be interpreted as incitements to civil war (A. 4.35.2): “It would not have been difficult to interpret Cordus’ narrative as criticism of the principate and a call to arms.” The commentary is careful to note that it is Woodman alone who is making these arguments: “AJW, however, believes... In AJW’s opinion ...”

If such disingenenuousness was intended by Cordus and his purpose in writing history was in fact to arouse public dissatisfaction and to bring about the end of the principate, Tacitus and Tacitus’ Cordus may be at a disagreement

Cordus' thoughts on historiography.¹⁰ McHugh argues that Tacitus and Cordus, one in the juxtaposed excursus on historiography and the other in the speech following directly after it, both speak against oppressors of freedom of speech in the coded subtleties of “figured speech,” a phrase coined by Ahl and defined as the intent “to achieve reproach without committing oneself to an outright statement of reproach.”¹¹ Whereas Tacitus is a master of figured speech, McHugh argues, Cordus fails to employ it successfully in his speech. She concludes that Tacitus “demonstrates how not to speak through the negative example of Cremutius Cordus, whose attempt at figured speech fails.”¹² While her argument opens up the possibility that Tacitus did not intend Cordus to be a mirrored, much less perfected, version of himself, her argument ultimately falls in line with the general consensus we have discussed above: she does not claim that Tacitus and Cordus disagree fundamentally on how and why one ought to write history, but that Tacitus is merely boasting that his *Annals* are better at achieving the same purpose than Cordus' were.

Both Woodman and McHugh introduce refreshing perspectives to the interpretation of Cordus' speech; Woodman suggests that there may be differences between Cordus' and Tacitus' views on historiography, and McHugh introduces the idea that there is an agonistic component to the juxtaposition of the excursus on historiography and the following speech of Cordus. Incorporating the work of both I intend to argue for a more radical conclusion than either

over whether one ought to write history with an eye to being *sine ira et studio*—if one does not also see disingenuousness in the claim of *sine ira et studio*.

¹⁰ Martin (1981) too appears ambivalent about what the audience ought to glean from Cordus' speech: “the reader is left to apply the moral as he will: Cremutius' outspokenness had cost him his life” (137).

¹¹ Ahl (1984) 178.

¹² McHugh (2004) 392.

scholar. I wish to push against the current consensus that Tacitus is endorsing his own historiographical project through the martyrish legacy of Cremutius Cordus, and I deny that Tacitus' thoughts on historiography align with Cordus'. Rather, I believe that Tacitus' evaluation of Cordus' character, work, and death is not only much more complicated than uncritical praise, but also that Tacitus, by juxtaposing his thoughts on historiography with Cordus', is attempting to distinguish himself from Cordus as a radically different type of historian.

Tacitus' unfavorable views of Cordus and his histories, I will argue, stems from an ideological difference concerning utility. That history should be didactically useful is a time-honored concept in ancient historiography, and Tacitus says in the excursus that the purpose of his *Annals* is to be useful in an informative sense for those living under the contemporary form of government: "with a change of government and with no other recourse for the safety of state than that one man should rule, it may be useful for these things [i.e., the events of Tiberius' reign] to be investigated and handed down" (A. 4.33.2). I will argue that Tacitus considered utility the area in which Cordus failed to be an adequate historian, and, therefore, failed to benefit the state and citizens in a constructive manner. I will also argue that Tacitus' account of Cordus' speech, when analyzed in light of the preceding discussion concerning the writing of history under "one man rule," is really a rebuke to Cordus' foolhardiness and self-indulgent desire to die, to borrow Tacitus' own words in another context, a "self-serving" or "ostentatious death" (*ambitiosa mors*).¹³

An interpretation that varies as widely from the accepted consensus as the one expressed above naturally requires evidence. But I would first like to take a rather circuitous approach to the portrayal of Cordus in the *Annals* by looking beyond modern scholarship and by examining

¹³ *Agr.* 42.5. This passage and its implications for the interpretation of Cordus' speech will be discussed more fully below.

the ancient sources for their thoughts on Cremutius Cordus the historian. The popular reading of Tacitus' account of Cordus, that is, as Tacitus' literary reflection of himself, has influenced modern readers to read Cordus as a man of entirely irreproachable character, and to imagine that he has been universally praised as such since his death. Historically speaking, however, the reception of his life and work has been much more mixed. Suetonius, as we shall see, quite dislikes Cordus, while the manner of his death endeared him to Seneca the Younger, whose philosophical beliefs extolled the virtues of protest through suicide. In Seneca's *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, a letter written to Marcia, the daughter of Cordus, on the occasion of her son's death, he elevates Cordus to the status of Stoic icon and literary figure second only to that of Cato Uticensis. And like the posthumous reputation of Cato Uticensis, the reputation of Cordus has been similarly polarized.¹⁴ By examining the ancient views on Cordus, I hope to create a better sense of the literary figure that Cordus had become by Tacitus' time, and to understand how Tacitus was interacting with the figure, historical and literary, of Cordus by rendering his own portrayal of the controversial historian.

Our two most important Latin sources for the works of Cremutius Cordus are Seneca the Younger and Suetonius. What Seneca thinks of Cordus should be clear in general terms from the remarks made above—I will put him aside for now to discuss Suetonius' remarks about Cordus. Since Suetonius was a contemporary of Tacitus, I believe that understanding Suetonius' views on Cordus will give an idea of at least one contemporary perspective that may have informed Tacitus' own thoughts on Cordus and his histories.

¹⁴ For the polarized reception of Cato the Younger, cf. Edwards (2007) 1-5, Corbeill (Forthcoming).

II. Cremutius Cordus in Suetonius

The first mention of Cordus in Suetonius' *Lives* occurs in the biography of Augustus, whose image as *salubris magis quam ambitiosus princeps*¹⁵ Suetonius is eager to preserve. In his praise of Augustus, Suetonius sometimes coupled pro-Augustan remarks with attacks, implicit or explicit, against anti-Augustan figures. One such example of praise for Augustus at the expense of his enemies is an episode concerning the trial of Augustus' friend, Asprenas Nonius,¹⁶ who was defending himself against a charge brought by Cassius Severus, an orator and outspoken opponent of Augustus with the dubious distinction of being the first to be exiled during his reign for slanderous writing.¹⁷ At the trial of Nonius Suetonius depicts Augustus as being in a dilemma, whether he should abuse his power to save Nonius from Cassius Severus' powerful rhetoric. Suetonius stresses the moral complexity of this dilemma, that Augustus might have to resort to unlawful power in order to obtain a just ruling, Nonius' acquittal. Though he passes no overt judgment on Cassius Severus, Suetonius clearly wishes to portray him as an antagonist to Augustus and an instigator of his troubles.

It is in a similar vein of antagonism against Augustus attempting to do good deeds with extraordinary power that Cordus is first mentioned in the *Lives*. In this passage Suetonius writes that Augustus undertook the task of reorganizing the senate after the civil wars:

¹⁵ *Aug.* 42.1

¹⁶ *Aug.* 56.3.

¹⁷ In keeping with his pro-Augustan sentiments, Suetonius conveniently neglects to mention that Cassius Severus was exiled by Augustus (cf. *A.* 1.72.3).

Senatorum affluentem numerum deformi et incondita turba—erant enim super mille, et quidam indignissimi et post necem Caesaris per gratiam et praemium adlecti, quos orciuus uocabat—ad modum pristinum et splendorem redegit duabus lectionibus.

The number of senators swelled with an unseemly and disordered mob, for there were over a thousand of them, and some were completely dishonorable and selected after the death of Caesar through favor and bribe—these the common folk used to say “were men promoted by Death.”¹⁸ Augustus restored the senate back to its former extent and glory in two series of selections.

(Aug. 35.1)

The sharp contrast in language (*deformis, incondita, turba, indignissimi* opposed to *modus pristinus, splendor*) indicates that Suetonius believed that Augustus obtained complete success in reorganizing the senate. The sentence immediately following, however, appears to put a damper on Augustus’ success:

quo tempore existimatur lorica sub ueste munitus ferroque cinctus praesedis decem ualentissimis senatorii ordinis amicis sellam suam circumstantibus. Cordus Cremutius scribit ne admissum quidem tunc quemquam senatorum nisi solum et praemptato sinu.

At this time Augustus **is believed** to have been protected by a breastplate under his cloak and armed with a sword, and to have presided over the senate while ten very physically imposing friends of the senatorial order remained standing around his chair. Cremutius Cordus writes that no senator was even admitted then unless he was alone and had his clothing searched.

(Aug. 35.1-2)

The narrative takes an unexpectedly negative turn for Augustus—unless, that is, we are supposed to understand that the information hostile to Augustus given is inaccurate. Suetonius writes that in the second of these “series of selections” Augustus and Agrippa personally reviewed each member of the senate,¹⁹ and that during this selection process Augustus *reportedly* wore armor.

¹⁸ This is my rather free translation of *orciuus*. Cf. Hurley (2011) 71: “Slaves set free by their masters’ wills; Orcus was god of the underworld.”

¹⁹ Suetonius describes the first *lectio* as a process *quo uir uirum legit* (Aug. 35.1.), implying that senators had autonomy to thin their own ranks, after which Augustus instituted a second *lectio*. Cornell (2013c) 593, however, points out on the basis of Cassius Dio’s account that there may have been an inversion—whether intentional or

The use of the verb *existimatur* and the complementary infinitive *praesedissee* instead of the more syntactically straightforward *praesedit* casts doubt upon the historicity of this event—who is it that believes this? That Suetonius says that Augustus is “believed to have presided” rather than “he presided” shows an effort to create a layer of uncertainty between the reader and the event. This uncertainty, joined with the fact that *existimare* can mean *to believe wrongly*,²⁰ suggests that Suetonius is attempting to portray this incident, that Augustus wore armor in the *curia* while he reviewed the senators, as rumor rather than fact. But then Suetonius gives an even bolder and more damning example of misconduct by Augustus and provides Cremutius Cordus as the source. If we reject the historicity of the first event, then the rejection of the second event, that he did not allow senators into the senate house unless he had vetted them, naturally follows, and so too does the rejection of the source of the second event, Cordus. It appears that Suetonius is singling out Cordus for his hyperbolic outrage against perceived slights to the senate’s autonomy.

Augustus is portrayed in this section as attempting to preserve the traditional seat of power of the Republic by purging the dysfunctional remnants of the civil war from the senate’s ranks. At the very least, it seems, Suetonius believed that in this instance the end, having the senate returned “to its former extent and glory,” justified the means. Perhaps as a way of downplaying the severity of Augustus’ means Suetonius offers an anecdote from Cremutius

not—of the order in which Suetonius reports that these *lectiones* were conducted: “it looks as if Suetonius has inverted their true order.” If Suetonius did in fact invert the order, I believe that this strengthens the reading that Suetonius is unequivocally praising Augustus’ intervention. Presumably the result of the first *lectio* failed to meet the standard of Augustus, who then took matters into his own hands.

²⁰ A good example of *existimare* meaning to believe wrongly can be found in the passage concerning Cassius Severus and Asprenas Nonius discussed above. Suetonius reports that Augustus took his dilemma to the senate: *consuluit senatum, quid officii sui putaret; cunctari enim se, ne si superesset, eripere legibus reum, sin deesset, destituere ac praedamnare amicum existimaretur* (“he might be believed [and wrongly so] to be abandoning a friend to condemnation,” 56.3.1). Augustus is afraid that his motivation for being absent at his trial may be wrongly interpreted as giving up on a friend, rather than as respecting the boundaries of his power.

Cordus, whom he may have believed was discreditable. A skeptical treatment of the parts denouncing Augustus is the best reading of this passage, since otherwise there is difficulty in reconciling these rumors about Augustus with Suetonius' unqualified praise for Augustus' actions concerning the senatorial reorganization. The difficulty is further compounded by the fact that other mentions in the *Lives* of body searches conducted before meeting the emperor, such as in the *Life of Claudius* and *Vespasian*, have strong negative connotations.²¹ It would be odd if Suetonius did not offer a defense on Augustus' behalf—unless, of course, the implication that Cremutius Cordus was the originator or a propagator of these claims is itself a sort of defense against their validity.

Generally speaking the naming of sources in Roman historiography is an infrequent phenomenon, and sources were often invoked in order to be refuted.²² Though Suetonius is not strictly speaking a historian, he demonstrates in other parts of the *Lives*, particularly in the biography of Augustus, that he is not immune to the same willingness to engage in polemics with other authors.²³ When Suetonius cites a passage from Cordus that contains material of questionable historicity, this suggests that he believed Cordus to be a partisan, and thus an unreliable source. This tantalizingly brief mention of Cordus' histories gives us a hint not only of

²¹ *Claud.* 35.1, *Vesp.* 12. Cf. Cornell (2013c) 593: "Body searches of the emperor's peers were an affront."

²² Cf. Wallace-Hadrill (1984) 64 on ancient historians in general: "Ancient historians were habitually shoddy, by our standards at least, about citing their authorities. Predecessors are rarely named except at points of disagreement or error." For merely one example of naming sources for the sake of disagreeing with them, cf. Sklenář (2004), which analyzes Livy's well-known discussion of the casualty figures of the Battle of Cynoscephalae passed down by his sources: "By ridiculing the statistics provided by Valerius Antias and Claudius Quadrigarius, two of the most prominent annalists, and proudly announcing that he has followed Polybius, Livy seems not only to concede, but to proclaim, the Greek historian's superiority" (302).

²³ For examples, cf. Suetonius' defense of Augustus' relatively minor vices in *Aug.* 69-70.2 by citing (and thereby discrediting) outlandish and offensive invectives from the writings of Sextus Pompey, Mark and Lucius Antony, and certain anonymous poets. As Wallace-Hadrill (1984) 171 says, "Suetonius [shows] up the invective for what it is."

his anti-Caesarian/Augustan sentiments, for which he is on trial in his appearance in Tacitus' *Annals*, but also the perception of his work as partisan in Suetonius', and therefore Tacitus', time.

That Suetonius, given his own leaning towards pro-Augustan sentiments, may have considered Cordus a disreputable historian is also evident by the company Cordus shares in another appearance in the *Lives*. In the *Life of Gaius* Suetonius writes that Gaius, as newly crowned emperor, permitted the writings of historians whose works were repressed under the previous two emperors to be circulated once more:

Titi Labieni, Cordi Cremuti, Cassi Seueri scripta senatus consultis abolita requiri et esse in manibus lectitarique permisit, quando maxime sua interesset ut facta quaeque posteris tradantur.

The writings of Titus Labienus, Cremutius Cordus, Cassius Severus, which were banned by decrees of the senate, Gaius allowed to be sought out, owned, and perused, since it was very much in his interest that every deed be passed down to posterity.

(*Gai.* 16.1.1)

What initially appears to be a correction of the wrongs of Augustus and Tiberius turns out to be, when more closely examined, an attempt by Gaius to self-promote by undermining his predecessors.²⁴ We have already seen Suetonius' thoughts on Cassius Severus, how Suetonius disparages him by juxtaposing his supposedly false charge against Nonius Asprenas with Augustus' upright character (*Aug.* 56.3). Though questioning his character overall in that passage, Suetonius more specifically challenges Cassius Severus' credentials as a reliable source

²⁴ I disagree with the opinion of Hurley (1993) that Ch. 16 is merely a "dense collection of Gaius' good actions" (53). I believe that she is more correct when she says that many measures listed in this chapter were "a response to unpopular measures of Tiberius, from whom Gaius found it desirable to separate himself." As I will argue below, I do not think that Suetonius wants to portray Gaius as doing most, or even some, of these actions out of good will, but merely out of a desire "to inflame the devotion of men with every kind of popular courtship" (*incendebat et ipse studia hominum omni genere popularitatis, Gai.* 15.1)

later in the biography of Vitellius, whose *Life* Suetonius begins with a discussion about the divergent accounts of his family history. Suetonius blames flattery and slander for the existence of two radically different origin accounts:

*quod ego per adultores obtrectatoresque **imperatoris** Vitelli euenisse opinarer, nisi aliquanto **prius** de familiae condicione uariatum esset.*

I would believe that [differences in the accounts of Vitellius' family history] came about through flatterers and slanderers of Vitellius **when he was emperor**, if there hadn't already been variance some time **beforehand** about his family's status.

(*Vit.* 1.1)

The words in bold show that Suetonius does not imply that the *adultores obtrectatoresque* did not create these divergent accounts, but that “flatters and malicious critics” did indeed create them, though at some point before Vitellius became emperor. Since Suetonius does not claim to give balanced accounts of Vitellius' family history, we should assume that the two accounts of Vitellius' origin that he provides in *Vit.* 1.2-2.1 are general overviews, with all of their exaggerations and patently false claims, of the accounts provided by the flatterers and slanderers.

Contra plures auctorem generis libertinum prodiderunt, Cassius Seuerus nec minus alii eundem et sutorem ueteramentarium, cuius filius sectionibus et cognituris uberius compendium nactus, ex muliere uulgari, Antiochi cuiusdam furnariam exercentis filia, equitem R. genuerit.

Contrarily, several have written that the founder of his family was a freedman, and Cassius Severus and some others say that this same founder was a mender of shoes, whose son, having made quite a profit by selling forfeited goods and receiving attorney dues, also had a son with a common woman, the daughter of some Antiochus, a bakery owner, and that son went on to become a knight.

(*Vit.* 2.1)

The fact that Cassius Severus is named as a source for the second group, the *obtrectatores*, seems to indicate that Suetonius thought that Cassius Severus' writings, at the very least those parts in

which he discussed the family of Vitellius, were not only false, but slanderously so. Moreover, the structure of this passage is reminiscent of the passage above concerning Augustus' second *lectio* of senators (*Aug.* 35.1-2): first, a somewhat plausible account is given, followed then by a more radical claim with a citation of a source, who, given the incredulousness of the claim, now appears less trustworthy.

To return to Gaius' revival of banned texts, we see that it is unlikely for Suetonius to have believed that either Cassius Severus or Cremutius Cordus could be considered credible sources. As for Titus Labienus it is easy to see how his fierce and indiscriminate criticism, for which he received the nickname *Rabienus*, "the rabid one,"²⁵ made him uncongenial to Augustus, who ordered his works burned, and therefore to Suetonius. It is rather surprising that *Gai.* 16.1 is the only mention of Labienus as a source in the *Lives*, whereas the works of Severus and Cordus are cited with some frequency. His near complete absence is difficult to account for given Suetonius' rather frequent citation of the opponents of Julius Caesar and Augustus, if only for the purpose of refuting those opponents. Nevertheless, it is accurate, I think, to say that Suetonius believed none of the three—Cordus, Severus, Labienus—as reliable sources of information. Perhaps Gaius, in Suetonius' account, believed them unreliable as well, and the revival of the texts was not ordered for the sake of their historical accuracy, but rather was a cunning move to unleash sharp, slanderous criticism against his predecessors. Gaius would then appear more tolerant by comparison. Indeed, this would make a great deal of sense out of Gaius' rather cryptic statement that it was "very much in his interest" or was "very advantageous for

²⁵ Sen. Mai. *Cont.* 10 *praef.* 5: "his freedom was such that it exceeded the name of freedom, and, because he used to rip into classes and individuals indiscriminately, he was called *Rabienus*."

him” (*maxime sua interesset*) that the works of these particular historians survive for posterity.²⁶ Gaius shows a great deal of political savvy with this maneuver, as one scholar notes: “reacting at the beginning of his reign against his predecessor’s repression, [Gaius] may have thought that rehabilitating Cordus was a particularly valuable point in his favor.”²⁷ My contention so far has been that Suetonius believed that Cordus’ and the others’ works were all the more valuable for Gaius because they were severely, to the point of inaccuracy and slander, critical of Augustus.

To point out a tangible similarity between Suetonius and Tacitus in regards to their thoughts concerning the historians mentioned in *Gai.* 16.1.1, Tacitus also did not hold Cassius Severus in high esteem. He is first mentioned in the *Annals* as the first to be indicted under the *maiestas* law:

primus Augustus cognitionem de famosis libellis specie legis eius tractavit, commotus Cassii Seueri libidine, qua uiros feminasque inlustres procacibus scriptis diffamauerat

Augustus was the first to hold a hearing about slanderous pamphlets under the pretense of this law, shaken as he was by Cassius Severus’ lack of restraint, with which he had defamed renowned men and women with insolent writing.

(A. 1.72.3)

Tacitus continues the story of Cassius Severus’ justified exile in A. 4.21.3, where he writes that Severus stubbornly persisted to act in the same, hostile way, thereby “directing new and old hatreds” (*atque illic eadem factitando recentia ueteraque odia aduertit*). Interestingly, Tacitus

²⁶ Once again I disagree with Hurley (1993) that *quando maxime sua interesset* ... is an “implicitly ironic statement” (54), that is, Suetonius is being ironical about the actual effect that history has had on Gaius’ reputation. It appears clear that this statement is not in the authorial voice, but alleges a thought held or expressed by Gaius. For the use of *intersum* to connote advantage and expedience, cf. *OLD* 9a. For an example of this use in Suetonius, especially in the mouth of an emperor, cf. *Tib.* 21.6, a message from Tiberius to Augustus: “it is of no advantage to me that I be well myself, if you will not (*nihil interest ualeam ipse necne, si tu non ualebis*); also cf. *Jul.* 86.2, a purported quotation of Julius Caesar: “[he used to say that] it was not so much in his own interest but in that of the state, that he be safe (*non tam sua quam rei publicae interesse, uti saluus esset*).

²⁷ Cornell (2013a) 500.

reminds readers of Cassius Severus' fate soon before the account of Cremutius Cordus' trial. This, Woodman says with some ambiguity, has been done in order to “foreshadow” the trial of Cordus.²⁸ It is difficult to say, however, what this foreshadowing entails outside of the fact that both are *maiestas* trials. Regardless, it is clear enough that Tacitus dislikes Cassius Severus. Perhaps the fact that Suetonius and Tacitus align in their opinion about Cassius Severus implies some overlap in opinion concerning Cremutius Cordus as well.

I believe that I can so far claim the following. First, it appears that Suetonius found Cremutius Cordus to be an unreliable, or if this is too strong, a strongly biased source. Next, Suetonius associated Cordus with a group of historians with likeminded prejudices against the principate. One of the members of this group is Cassius Severus, whom Tacitus seems to believe was rightly—but, perhaps, not lawfully—punished for his slanderous writings. It would be too large a leap to say at this stage that Tacitus believed that Cremutius Cordus also was rightly—but, perhaps, not lawfully—punished, but we can claim that Tacitus and Suetonius held common beliefs about a certain kind of historian, perhaps the kind that did not write *sine ira et studio*, and that this belief may have led to a mutual dislike of Cremutius Cordus.

The strongest sign of Suetonius' dislike for Cordus and his works is the way in which he treats him at the moment of greatest potential sympathy. *Tib.* 61 is dedicated to documenting the *crudelitas* of Tiberius, and in 61.3 Suetonius lists several victims who were destroyed on account of their *uerba*:

omne crimen pro capitali receptum, etiam paucorum simpliciumque uerborum. obiectum est poetae, quod in tragoedia Agamemnonem probris lacessisset; obiectum et historico, quod Brutum Cassiumque ultimos Romanorum dixisset. animaduersum statim in auctores scriptaque abolita, quamuis probarentur ante aliquot annos etiam Augusto audiente recitata.

²⁸ Martin and Woodman (1989) 152: “[Cassius Severus’] case foreshadows that of Cremutius Cordus below.”

Every charge was tried as a capital offense, even those of a few harmless words. A poet was brought to trial because he had attacked Agamemnon in a tragedy for his disgraceful actions. A historian was brought to trial because he had said that Brutus and Cassius were the last of the Romans. There was immediate punishment against the authors and their writings were destroyed, though they were approved a few years prior when they were recited in the presence of Augustus.

(*Tib.* 61.3)

Suetonius does not waste an opportunity to praise Augustus' tolerance in comparison to that of Tiberius, and due to the combination of the effects of Augustus' goodwill and Tiberius' cruelty readers are led to sympathize with the two condemned *auctores*. However, Suetonius neglects to recognize these victims of Tiberius by name. The reason for this strange omission may lie in the fact that Suetonius wished to avoid granting sympathy to either person: the *historicus*, as evident by the charge, is Cordus;²⁹ the *poeta* is Mamercus Aemilianus Scaurus, a politician who makes appearances in the Tiberian hexad of Tacitus' *Annals*,³⁰ where Tacitus criticizes him for his "notorious effort" (*infami opera*, 3.66.2) and being "shameful in his manner of life" (*uita probosus*, 6.29.3).³¹ The association of Scaurus with Cordus, as in the case of his association with Cassius Severus, may indicate Suetonius' negative opinions about Cordus. In any case, Cremutius Cordus is denied recognition by name in a passage that recalls his most famous and sympathetic moment. Such then is the reputation of Cordus and his works in Suetonius: suspected of bias at best, of slander at worst, and at his most pathetic hour unnamed.

²⁹ Note the similarity of the charge imputed against Cordus here (*Brutum Cassiumque ultimos Romanorum*) and in Tacitus (*C. Cassium Romanorum ultimum dixisset*, *A.* 4.34.1). The phrase *ultimum (-os) Romanorum* is, to my knowledge, only attested one other time, in Seneca the Younger's *de Breuitate Vitae*. There he writes that someone had related to him that "Sulla was the last of the Romans to extend the *pomerium*" (*Sullam ultimum Romanorum protulisse pomerium*, 13.8). The related phrase *ultimum (-os) Romanum (-os)* does not appear in Latin literature.

³⁰ For the identification of Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus, cf. Dio Cassius 58.24.3-4; Cornell (2013c) 592.

³¹ Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus does, however, appear to vindicate himself to Tacitus somewhat by the manner of his death: "Scaurus, as was worthy of the Aemilii of old, preempted condemnation" (*Scaurus, ut dignum ueteribus Aemiliis, damnationem anteit*, *A.* 6.29.4).

III. Tacitus and *Ambitiosa Mors*

If Suetonius presents one perspective on Cordus and his works, then Seneca the Younger presents another, quite different perspective. The difference in opinions about Cordus goes beyond, in simply stated terms, like or dislike of the historian. Rather the interests of each author dictate the aspects of Cordus on which each focuses. Suetonius, being a biographer, is interested in the information that Cordus has to offer in his histories, whereas Seneca, in this case writing a philosophical treatise in the form of a letter of consolation, is interested mainly in the character of the man himself. Tacitus, too, has his particular focuses: being a historian we should expect him to analyze Cordus as a historian, but the fact that Cordus is provided an opportunity to speak in the *Annals* suggests that Tacitus is also interested in exploring the character of the historian. This line of reasoning, that Tacitus does pronounce a judgment, whether implicit or explicit, on Cordus' character, should be familiar to those who believe that Tacitus depicts Cordus in such a way as "to assert his own integrity."³²

So far I have argued that Suetonius provides evidence for the unfavorable reception of Cordus' histories in the same period in which Tacitus wrote. I will argue below that Seneca in turn provides a context for the interpretation of Cordus' character, a context which, though nearly sixty years prior to the time in which Tacitus wrote, most likely held influence in Tacitus' time. I have offered the possibility that Tacitus and Suetonius may be in general agreement as to his (lack of) qualifications as a historian. I will now suggest the possibility that Tacitus is in disagreement with Seneca as to the nobility of Cordus' character.

³² On the viewpoint of Cordus as a mouthpiece for Tacitus cf. Edwards (2007) 139.

I have already mentioned above that the most significant discussion of Cordus by Seneca occurs in *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, a philosophical treatise on grief written as a consolatory letter to Marcia, daughter of Cordus, on the death of her son. The parts concerning Cordus make up a small portion of the overall letter, and much of those parts have very little to do with the substance or quality of the histories Cordus wrote. The lack of emphasis on the man's literary career is not at all surprising given the genre, consolatory writing, in which Seneca is here writing.³³ Rather, Seneca is more interested in expounding the man's virtues, his *eloquentia* and *libertas* (*ad Marc.*1.3), and in depicting the courage with which Cordus met his death. In Seneca's account Cordus' upstanding character is placed in direct contrast to the evil character of his foils, Sejanus and his agents. Given a need for antagonists against Cordus (without antagonizing the emperor),³⁴ they play a much greater, more active role in Seneca's account than they do even in that given by Tacitus. The decision to commit suicide is couched in a narrative of personal enmity: "if he wanted to live, he had to ask Sejanus" (*si vivere vellet, Seianus rogandus erat*, 22.6). When Cordus' death is imminent and his opponents attempt to stop him from committing suicide, the accomplishment of the suicide becomes an important moral victory.

accusatores auctore Seiano adeunt consulum tribunalia, queruntur mori Cordum, ut interpellarent quod coegerant: adeo illis Cordus uidebatur effugere. magna res erat in quaestione, an mortis ius rei perderent; dum deliberatur, dum accusatores iterum adeunt, ille se absoluerat. uidesne, Marcia, quantae iniquorum temporum uices ex inopinato ingruant? fles, quod alicui tuorum mori necesse fuit? Paene non licuit!

³³ Even still the praise that Seneca does confer onto Cordus' histories in this *consolatio* seems rather cursory. Cornell (2013a) 500 is cautious about their quality: "The suspicion arises that it was for political correctness, or notoriety, that [Cordus' book] was regarded rather than for intrinsic merit." Perhaps Seneca, like Suetonius, had doubts about the merits of Cordus' histories.

³⁴ Seneca wrote this letter in exile, and some scholars interpret this letter as a means of maintaining a presence in the Roman literary world while physically displaced from Rome; cf. Wilson (2014) 69. For other possible political motivations of *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, including a theory that Seneca was attempting to distance himself from his familial ties with Sejanus, cf. Griffin (1976) 23.

The accusers, at the instigation of Sejanus, went to the consular tribunal and complained that Cordus was dying so that they might prevent that which they had compelled; it was to this extent that Cordus seemed to them to be slipping out of their hands. An important matter was undergoing trial, whether defendants would lose the right of death; while it was being deliberated, while the accusers were approaching again, that man had won acquittal. Do you see, Marcia, how many great vices of unjust times fall upon us unexpectedly? Do you weep because one of your loved ones had to die? Cordus nearly couldn't!

(ad Marc. 22.7-8)

The glorification of suicide expressed here generally fits Seneca's thoughts on justified self-killing in his letters and philosophical treatises.³⁵ In this passage Seneca considers Cordus an exemplar of the politically motivated suicide, a way of dying that embraces the idea, as Griffin has put it, that "it is better to kill oneself than live and be treated like an animal by a tyrant," or, as in Cordus' case, by one of the agents of a tyrant.³⁶ Admiration of such a death, however, is not idiosyncratic to Seneca, but was endemic to the Roman aristocracy of the early principate in general. Hill, discussing the phenomenon of aristocratic suicide in the early years of Imperial Rome, writes,

Suicide was the focus of intense aristocratic interest and admiration during this era, and members of the nobility appear to have been anxious to dispose of themselves in a suitably high-minded and audience-oriented fashion through conforming to pre-established suicidal models. Under the Julio-Claudians the aristocrats of imperial Rome are remarkable not only for the frequency with which they do away with themselves, but the zeal they bring to celebrating this fact in their praise of others' deaths and the considered ostentation of their own. ...

It appears to be indisputable that the number of self-killings amongst the aristocracy of Rome leapt sharply between the ascension of Tiberius to the throne in A.D. 14 and the death of Nero in A.D. 68. Tacitus, our main historical source for this period, remarks that suicide was unusually frequent during this period, amounting to a virtual epidemic, and the point is echoed a century

³⁵ For Seneca on suicide, cf. Edwards (2007) 78-112, Griffin (1976) 372-388, Hill (2004) 145-182.

³⁶ Griffin (1976) 382.

and a half later by the Greek historian Cassius Dio. ... Suicide was, it seems, in the early principate an occupational hazard of being an aristocrat.³⁷

Seneca's fascination with and enthusiasm for suicide was shared by a great many of the Roman elite during the imperial period, as is apparent both in the increase of the act of suicide itself amongst the nobility and in the rise of suicide-themed literature in the wake of that famous suicide of Cato Uticensis during the Civil War, after whose death all following suicide narratives were modeled.³⁸

In opposition to contemporary aristocratic attitudes on suicide Tacitus criticizes the phenomenon of politically motivated self-killings. He is the only author of the imperial period to give such a critique.³⁹ In the concluding paragraphs of the *Agricola*, an encomiastic and biographical account of his father-in-law Cn. Julius Agricola,⁴⁰ Tacitus compares the quiet moderating effect that his father-in-law had on Domitian with the extravagant, self-indulgent desire for an ostentatious death (*ambitiosa mors*) held by those who preferred to be well-known than to provide a benefit to the state:

Proprium humani ingenii est odisse quem laeseris; Domitiani uero natura praeceps in iram, et quo obscurior, eo inreuocabilior, moderatione tamen prudentiaque Agricolae leniebatur, quia non contumacia neque inani iactatione libertatis famam fatumque prouocabat. sciunt, quibus moris est illicita mirari, posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos uiros esse, obsequiumque ac

³⁷ Hill (2004) 183-185.

³⁸ Hill (2004) 186 on the modeling of suicide narrative after Cato's: "The idea of casting one's own death as precisely as possible in the mould of Cato's agonized and philosophical death seems to have appeared early in the history of the Principate."

³⁹ Hill (2004) 9 refers to the passage in *Agr.* 42 as "anomalous in its negative appraisal" and calls it "the sole instance in Latin literature of an attempt to comment upon the phenomenon of the 'political suicide' *tout court*." Also, cf. Edwards (2007) 126: "this passage is unusual in offering a general comment on the phenomenon of conspicuous aristocratic death—and also in expressing disapproval of such ends."

⁴⁰ For the difficulties in establishing a firm genre for this work, cf. Woodman (2014) 1-11.

modestiam, si industria ac uigor adsint, eo laudis excedere, quo plerique per abrupta enisi, sed in nullum rei publicae usum ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt.

It is human nature to hate the person to whom you have done harm; truly, Domitian's nature, quick to anger, as inscrutable as it was implacable, was nevertheless mellowed by the moderation and prudence of Agricola, since Agricola was not rousing fame and destruction through provocation and an empty boast of freedom. Let those for whom it is customary to admire illicit behavior know that it is possible, even under bad emperors, for great men to exist, and that obedience and modesty, when vigorous hard work is present, can reach a level of praise which most have attained through dangerous paths. But these men have obtained renown through ostentatious death, having done the state no good.⁴¹

(Ag. 42.4-5)

Woodman provides the general, and I think correct, consensus about the specific group of people whom Tacitus means to criticize in this passage: "it is generally inferred that he has in mind the Stoics, for whom *libertas* was not negotiable."⁴² As he also points out, the combination of *inanis* and *iactatio* is Senecan.⁴³ It is impossible to say for certain that Tacitus is consciously channeling Senecan phraseology with *inani iactatione libertatis*. If he is, however, then Tacitus gives this passage quite a sardonic bite by using the language of the most famous proponent of the Stoic philosophy among the Latin authors against Stoic philosophy itself. Regardless of whether there is a direct reference to Seneca here, Tacitus still attacks, if indirectly, the glorification of suicide to which Seneca contributed.

⁴¹ It is important to note that Tacitus' condemnation of those who have died "ostentatious deaths" most likely did not stem from a purely ideological difference in the ways to approach the problem of a bad emperor. As one who describes his own career as "initiated by Vespasian, magnified by Titus, advanced further by Domitian" (*dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito auctam, a Domitiano longius prouectam non abnuerim, Hist. 1.1*), Tacitus makes an effort to present an apology for both his father-in-law's and his own successful careers under Domitian, even as so many prominent detractors against Domitian's reign were killed for their opposition. Nevertheless Tacitus' condemnation of *ambitiosa mors* certainly did in large part come out of real ideological differences with it. For "elements of apology" in *Agricola* and post-Domitian literature in general, cf. Edwards (2007) 133-134.

⁴² Woodman (2014) 303.

⁴³ Woodman (2014) 301: "[the combination of *inani*] with *iactatione* is Senecan (*Ben. 2.11.6, Brev. uit. 13.7*)."

In this passage Tacitus condemns one of the two virtues that Seneca most highly praises in Cordus, the “desire to be free” (*libertas*), if that desire to be free is expressed in “empty boasting” (*inani iactatione*).⁴⁴ Moreover, if *contumacia* (provocation) and *iactatio* (boasting) imply documents or speeches through which the person who has died “an ostentatious death” incurred the wrath of a *malus princeps*, then Tacitus is also condemning the second virtue that Seneca praises in Cordus, the “ability to be eloquent,” if that eloquence was employed for the sake of creating such *contumacia* and *iactatio*.⁴⁵

Taken altogether *non contumacia neque inani iactatione libertatis famam fatumque prouocabat* can be translated more freely in the following way: “[Agricola] was not provoking a fame-accruing death by speaking with the intent to be inflammatory (*contumacia*) while pretending to speak merely with frankness (*inani iactatione libertatis*).”⁴⁶ In praising Agricola for not partaking in such behavior, Tacitus simultaneously rebukes those who use *libertas* as justification for intentionally provocative words and actions. He expresses in the preface of the *Histories* this same distrust of disingenuous uses of *libertas* specifically in the context of writing history:

sed ambitionem scriptoris facile auerseris, obrectatio et liuor pronis auribus accipiuntur. quippe adulationi foedum crimen seruitutis, malignitati falsa species libertatis inest.

[When reading historical works] one easily shuns courting for favor, while malicious disparagements are received by welcome ears. It stands that in flattery there is the foul charge of servility, but in spitefulness there is the false appearance of freedom.

⁴⁴ Recall that Seneca praises Cordus “on account of his two most excellent qualities ... his ability to be eloquent and his desire to be free” (*ob duas res pulcherrimas ... eloquentiam et libertatem*, 1.3).

⁴⁵ For a definition of *contumacia* in Tacitus and his dislike of it, cf. Damon (2003) 205: “*contumacia*: ‘provocation,’ usually pointless and sometimes harmful. ... Tacitus’ warmest praises go to those who show how to avoid it.”

⁴⁶ I take *famam fatumque* here as hendiadys meaning a renown that comes about through one’s fate; *famam fatumque prouocare* is essentially synonymous to dying an *ambitiosa mors*.

(H. 1.1.2)

While flattery, Tacitus says, was immediately recognized and rejected as such, spitefulness (*malignitas*) could mislead readers into believing uncritically as true that which was said under the pretense of *libertas*—hence Tacitus saying that in *malignitas* there is a “false appearance of freedom” (*falsa species libertatis*). But what incentive was there for an author to present himself a champion of *libertas*? Ronald Syme writes that this Roman virtue, though a relic of the Republic, still held a great deal of prestige during the empire despite having lost much of its meaning under an emperor: “At Rome all men paid homage to *libertas*, holding it to be something roughly equivalent to the spirit and practice of the Republican government.”⁴⁷ By claiming to speak with *libertas*, then, authors won praise from readers sympathetic to the Republican cause, and this praise nourished the desires of those who wished to advance their reputation through their works. Thus the more polemically an author wrote, the more praise he received from those who agreed with his (Republican) sentiments. That famous statement in the introduction of Tacitus’ *Annals*, that he would write history *sine ira et studio*, can, like the passage from the *Histories* above, be seen as a response to the use of *libertas* as a cover to write with the intention of arousing anger and indignation for the sake of advancing one’s renown and reputation.

We have already discussed, through an examination of Suetonius’ remarks about Cordus, that Cordus wrote with much *malignitas* towards the Caesars. Then the possibility stands that Tacitus and Cordus had substantially different ideas about the place of *libertas* in writing history: when Tacitus accuses historians of writing with spitefulness merely to advance one’s own

⁴⁷ Syme (1939) 155.

reputation as a proponent of *libertas*, we must consider the idea that Cordus is among those whom Tacitus is accusing. With that possibility established, I now suggest the added possibility that Tacitus believed that Cordus, willing to use *libertas* in his writing to self-promote, also used political suicide as a way of garnering fame for himself, of becoming famous through an “ostentatious death,” *ambitiosa mors*.

As we see in *Agr.* 42.4-5, Tacitus identifies a certain kind of political suicide as the ultimate form of making a provocative and disingenuous claim of *libertas* for the sake of personal glory. This kind of political suicide can only be called “political” in a causal, not purposive, sense. The cause of an *ambitiosa mors*, especially considering its context in the *Agricola*, is political, since one is compelled to commit suicide by a *malus princeps*; the purpose is non-political, as the very nature of such a self-glorifying death does not seek to further a cause, but only to advance one’s own renown.⁴⁸ Therefore, the person who dies such a death, while compelled to die *from* political reasons, die *for* no political purposes, and hence “does the state no good.” For this kind of political suicide, one which is self-serving and therefore unserviceable to the state, Tacitus shows strong disapproval. I believe that Tacitus includes Cordus in the number of those who sought just such an *ambitiosa mors*, and I will begin to argue for this conclusion by examining the fact that this passage (*Agr.* 42.4-5) is directed against the Stoics, and that Cordus, though not ostensibly a Stoic, conforms to the criteria that make them disagreeable to Tacitus; the Stoics’ desire for an *ambitiosa mors* is reflected in Cordus’ own.

The perceived difficulty of reading the Stoics as the intended targets of this passage is that Tacitus may appear to contradict himself, since in the first chapters of the *Agricola* he

⁴⁸ I agree for the most part with the interpretation of this passage provided by Hill (2004) 10, who argues that an *ambitiosa mors* ultimately aims to acquire social standing: “[Tacitus] objects ... to the fact that these assertions are empty, because social standing ought to be a matter of the *usus rei publicae* (“utility to the Republic”) of one’s acts, and that these deaths, by contrast, ultimately served no purpose.”

praises the works of Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus, both Stoics who were killed by *mali principes*, the former executed under Domitian, the latter forced to commit suicide under Nero.⁴⁹ It may appear odd that Tacitus would criticize Stoics generally in one passage but then recognize the works of these particular Stoics elsewhere as “monumental works of the most renowned talents” (*monumenta clarissimorum ingeniorum*, *Agr.* 2.1). Woodman expresses some concern about the difficulty: “Tacitus’ statement here, if about ‘the Stoic martyrs’, seems difficult to reconcile with his treatment of those same Stoics elsewhere,” referring to the first chapters of the *Agricola*.⁵⁰ His concerns, in my mind, are unfounded if one could concede the possibility that Tacitus acknowledges the *ingenia* of these Stoics while disagreeing with their desire to die ostentatiously. The difficulty of reconciling Tacitus’ praise for the two Stoics’ works with his criticism of their pursuit of an *ambitiosa mors* stems from a false equivalence between fame/talent and utility towards the state: as mentioned above, Tacitus describes the accomplishments of Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus as “the monuments of the most renowned talents” (*monumenta clarissimorum ingeniorum*), but he also says that those who have died an *ambitiosa mors* have “obtained renown” through their ostentatious deaths (*inclaruerunt*, *Agr.* 42.5). The stem *clar-* in these instances, therefore, may not indicate a value judgment (i.e., that they were deserving of their fame), but may merely report the fact that these men were famous.⁵¹

⁴⁹ For the Stoic credentials of Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus, cf. Strunk (2017) 124-125.

⁵⁰ Woodman (2014) 303. Also cf. Edwards (2007) 136 for an attempt to reconcile *Agr.* 42.5 with Tacitus’ rather critical remark about Thrasea Paetus in the *Annals* (14.12.2).

⁵¹ This is quite different from other uses of *clarus*, e.g., Sallust: “for the glory of wealth and beauty is mutable and frail, but virtue is considered renowned and eternal” *nam diuitiarum et formae gloria fluxa atque fragilis est, uirtus clara aeternaque habetur* (*BC* 1.4).

For Tacitus an *ambitiosa mors* can even obtain *gloria*, inspiring others to imitative actions, and yet still have no use for the state if it serves only to increase the renown of the individual and to propagate more occurrences of *ambitiosa mors*. The connection of suicide to the pursuit of *gloria* is especially strong in Tacitus' accounts of Stoics, such as Helvidius Priscus and his father-in-law Thraesea Paetus. In the *Histories*, Tacitus reports that several of Vitellius' friends considered Paetus, who was forced to commit suicide under Nero, "an example of true glory" (*exemplar verae gloriae*, *H.* 2.91.3). In a sardonic comment about the inability of Stoic philosophy to moderate Priscus' self-aggrandizing pursuit of *gloria*, Tacitus writes, "even for philosophers the desire for glory is the very last thing to be extinguished" (*etiam sapientibus cupido gloriae nouissima exurit*, *H.* 4.6.1).⁵² Cordus, too, receives *gloria* through death: when men of talent are punished, Tacitus writes, their authority increases, and the punishers "prepare nothing for themselves except dishonor and for [the punished] glory" (*punitis ingeniis gliscit auctoritas ... qui eadem saeuitia usi sunt nisi dedecus sibi atque illis gloriam peperere*, *A.* 4.35.5). In contrast to those who pursue *gloria*, Tacitus calls his own historical project an *inglorius labor* (*A.* 4.32.2), and he compares the scintillating tales of the old historians to his own histories, which are, though less stimulating, more useful:

pleraque eorum, quae rettuli quaeque referam, parua forsitan et leuia memoratu uideri non nescius sum, sed nemo annales nostros cum scriptura eorum contenderit, qui ueteres populi Romani res composuere. ... nobis in arto et inglorius labor ... non tamen sine usu fuerit introspicere illa primo aspectu leuia, ex quis magnarum saepe rerum motus oriuntur.

⁵² The chapter preceding this passage makes it clear, by explaining some of their core doctrines, that the *sapientes* mentioned in *H.* 4.6.1 refer to the Stoics: "[Helvidius] followed the teachers of philosophy, who consider that which is morally right the only good, and that which is morally wrong the only bad, and who consider power, stature, and everything else beyond one's soul neither good nor bad" (*doctores sapientiae secutus est, qui sola bona quae honesta, mala tantum quae turpia, potentiam nobilitatem ceteraque extra animum neque bonis neque malis adnumerant*, *H.* 4.5.1).

That much of the things that I have reported and will report are most likely insignificant and unworthy of remembrance, I am not unaware. But no one should compare our annals with the work of those who wrote about the ancient deeds of the Roman people. ... Our is a narrow and inglorious task ... Nevertheless, it will not be without use to examine those things that are insignificant at first glance, from which the stirrings of great deeds often arise.

(A. 4.32.1)

Though the substance of his work may not arouse as much interest as the works of others, Tacitus intends to provide above all a useful service.⁵³ In other words, the author's renown is a poor indication of the same author's serviceability to the state, which Tacitus sets as the "final criterion for the judgment of moral action."⁵⁴

In Tacitus' account of Cordus' final speech, Cordus is portrayed as pursuing *gloria* in a manner similar to the Stoics mentioned above, by challenging the authority of the *princeps*. Tacitus writes that Cordus was "resolved on giving up his life" (*relinquendae uitae certus*, A. 4.34.2) and appeared in court before Tiberius to take one last opportunity to speak truth to power—whether he is successful in this effort, I will discuss in the next section. The striving after such *gloria*, preferring *libertas* over a subservient relationship to the powers-that-be, is what most endears Cordus to Seneca in the *De Consolatione ad Marciam*: Seneca writes to Marcia that Cordus watches her in heaven and declares, "I have permitted no man to have anything over me" (*ego nihil in me cuiquam permisi* 26.3). If in this passage Seneca has really captured Cordus' attitude towards his own death, Cordus certainly killed himself with the intent to make his death a statement of power over Tiberius.

⁵³ There is clearly some disingenuousness in calling his work *in arto et inglorius labor*. This passage has been clearly identified as an allusion to a line from Vergil's fourth *Georgic*: *in tenui labor; at tenuis non gloria* (4.6). For interpretations of this allusion, cf. Moles (1998) 122-126.

⁵⁴ Cf. Hill (2004) 256 for the full quote, in which Hill compares the moral systems of thought amongst Roman authors: "Tacitus' proposal that the final criterion for the judgment of moral action should be the *usus rei publicae* is identical to that of Cicero."

Consistent with his praise of Cordus, Seneca himself is portrayed by Tacitus in the *Annals* as challenging the authority of the *princeps* with his own death (15.62-64). This passage is worth examining, because, as I will argue, it shares several similarities with the trial and death of Cremutius Cordus. The possibility that Tacitus shaped both these scenes with intentional similarities should not be surprising given that, first, a strong Stoic affinity existed between these two figures, since Seneca, so to speak, adopted Cordus as a Stoic figure; second, both died in similar ways, by committing suicide at the order or threat of a *malus princeps*. By examining Tacitus' account of Seneca's suicide, I hope to be able to draw parallels between Tacitus' criticisms there and in the account of the trial and death of Cremutius Cordus.

IV. The Death of Seneca as *Ambitiosa Mors*: A Comparative Case

Seneca is a morally complex character in the *Annals*.⁵⁵ Ostensibly a voice of learned and moderating reason in Nero's court, he is also depicted as adept in the art of *realpolitik*.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, then, Seneca's death scene in the *Annals* has been subject to attempts to find within it signs of the same complexities that Seneca had throughout his life as Nero's advisor. Certainly a greater variety of scholarly opinions exists concerning Tacitus' account of Seneca's death than Cordus'. It has been pointed out that though Tacitus may seem to portray Seneca positively in his suicide, the protracted and overly dramatic nature of his death gives it a "theatrical and ostentatious" feeling.⁵⁷ Some, like Wilson, argue that Tacitus' account of Seneca's death even contains elements of "quiet mockery"⁵⁸ that feed suspicions that Tacitus may be portraying Seneca's final moments in a manner far less positive than that which Tacitus' Seneca himself imagines he is giving.

The level of self-consciousness about the spectacle of his own death that Seneca exhibits is the strongest evidence for interpreting this account as a critique of Seneca. Theatricality saturates Seneca's death; for example, Seneca attempts to imitate Socrates' death as recounted in

⁵⁵ On the complexity of Seneca's character in Tacitus, cf. Griffin (1976) 443: "[Tacitus'] favourite characters are in fact complex mixtures of good and bad." She in turns mentions in passing a quotation from Syme (1963) 552: "it has been argued that Tacitus could not make up his mind about Seneca ... but what if Tacitus' portrayal be pronounced a masterpiece, indicating an advance in technique and in historical imagination?"

⁵⁶ E.g., when the assassination plot against Agrippina the Younger fails, Seneca is the first to suggest that they immediately follow up with a second attempt in order to forestall a response (A. 14.7.3).

⁵⁷ Hill (2004) 182. For similar thoughts on the theatricality of Seneca's death, cf. Griffin (1976) 368: "For Tacitus ... Seneca's end was admirable but a shade histrionic; he clearly preferred the panache of Petronius;" Ker (2009) 113: "Even to ancient observers familiar with dramatic exits, Seneca's death would have stood out as especially theatrical."

⁵⁸ I have drawn the phrase "quiet mockery" from a line in Wilson (2014) 210, discussing Seneca's efforts to direct the narrative of his suicide: "Tacitus is *quietly mocking* Seneca's attempt to control the script of his own death..."

Plato's *Phaedo* both in setting, with an audience taking down his final words, and in instrument, hemlock. His aim, as portrayed by Tacitus, is to gain personal renown through his death, and so this account is a case study of the Tacitean *ambitiosa mors*. Through looking at the account of Seneca's final moments, "the egotism and the showiness of the performance" that is his death,⁵⁹ and afterwards comparing some of its characteristics with the account of Cordus' trial and death, we can make a stronger argument that the Stoics' and particularly Seneca's desire for *ambitiosa mors*, which Tacitus frequently criticizes, resides also in Cordus. I will divide my examination of this passage into three thematic sections, which find parallels in the account of Cordus' trial and death: I. The one committing suicide fails to address the true cause(s) behind his forced suicide. II. Instead, he focuses his final words on the continuation of a legacy, so that he may obtain renown after death. III. Following the suicide, Tacitus discusses the actions of the survivors who must live with the suicide's consequences. In this third and last section lies Tacitus' strongest ideological rebuke of the *ambitiosa mors*.

IVa. The Failure to Address True Causes

Seneca did not have a choice in the matter of committing suicide—Nero gave him no other recourse—and therefore he did not have the ability to choose to do the state good by living. This choice constitutes an important aspect of an *ambitiosa mors*, as Tacitus makes clear in the *Agricola*: *sed in nullum rei publicae usum ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt* (*Agr.* 42.5). Nevertheless, Tacitus believed that Seneca did have an opportunity to do the state good even in

⁵⁹ Wilson (2014) 208.

his death, but chose instead to enhance his reputation through self-glorification, thus failing to offer any benefit to the state after his death.

Recall that the self-declared aim of Tacitus' historical project is to provide a helpful account of life under "one man rule" (*si unus imperitet*, A. 4.33.2), to understand the power and nature of the *princeps* just as Romans in the past had had to understand that of the plebs and senate. Tacitus believed that understanding the *princeps* necessarily entails understanding both the *princeps* himself and those who had the *princeps*' ears through influence, flattery, or both.⁶⁰ Thus, when Seneca is implicated in Piso's conspiracy in Book 15 of the *Annals*, Tacitus identifies not only Nero but a number of different people for different reasons as being responsible for Seneca's death: Antonius Natalis, a captured conspirator eager to avoid punishment for himself, informs against him; Poppaea Sabina and Ofonius Tigellinus, Nero's wife and the Praetorian prefect respectively, whom Tacitus calls "the innermost council for a raging emperor" (*saeuienti principi intimum consiliorum*, A. 15.61.2), do not advise against Nero's decision; an officer of the Praetorian Guard Gavius Silvanus and his superior Fabius Rusticus, despite their hesitation to obey Nero's command to deliver to Seneca an order of suicide, obey nonetheless; Silvanus, unable to bring himself to complete the task, orders a nameless centurion to carry it out. Responsibility for Seneca's death falls on every link of the chain of command, a general breakdown of competency and rectitude that Tacitus bitinglly paraphrases as "the inevitable failure of everyone involved" (*fatali omnium ignauia*, A. 15.61.3). The word *fatalis* (inevitable or fated) suggests a failure to do one's moral duty that is built into the very system of government—Tacitus is instructing readers about the structural qualities of one-man rule.

⁶⁰ For Tacitus' thoughts about flattery towards the emperor, cf., e.g., A. 3.65.1-2.

Tacitus's account of the events leading up to Seneca's suicide follows the historiographical method laid out in the excursus in A. 4.32-33, "to compile together savage orders, endless accusations, false friendships, the destruction of innocents, the ever same reasons for death" in order to get a better grasp on the power of the *princeps* and the ways in which that power is diffused within his inner circle.⁶¹ We might expect that Seneca, a man so intimately involved in Nero's reign for so many years, when finally afforded the chance to speak his mind, would use the opportunity to point out, or even to rail against, the problems within the principate. Instead, Tacitus portrays Seneca as offering a rather shallow evaluation of the causes leading up to his death. As his friends and members of his household surround him and shed tears on his behalf, Tacitus records that Seneca checked their sadness with an appeal to philosophy:

simul lacrimas eorum modo sermone, modo intentior in modum coercentis ad firmitudinem reuocat, rogans ubi praecepta sapientiae, ubi tot per annos meditata ratio aduersum imminetia? cui enim ignaram fuisse saeuitiam Neronis? neque aliud superesse post matrem fratremque interfectos, quam ut educatoris praeceptorisque necem adiceret.

He was simultaneously checking their tears now with conversation, now more strictly in the manner of one recalling them to firmness, repeatedly asking, "Where had the precepts of wisdom, where reason, thought over through so many years in preparation for inevitabilities, gone? For to whom was Nero's savageness unknown? Nothing else remained after the death of mother and brother except to add the killing of teacher and instructor."⁶²

(A. 15.62.2)

These are Seneca's only words about Nero or about the circumstances that have led up to the current situation. He gives no further insight into the inner workings of the principate, about which he must have known a great deal, and in withholding this knowledge he does not instruct

⁶¹ *nos saeua iussa, continuas accusationes, fallaces amicitias, perniciem innocentium et easdem exitii causas coniungimus* (A. 4.33.3).

⁶² I have decided to place the translation of *ubi praecepta ... necem adiceret* in quotation in order to make it clear that Tacitus has Seneca speaking in indirect statement.

those around him in ways to avoid similar dangers. In contrast, Tacitus writes that Petronius gave thought to making sure that he could not endanger anyone after his death by destroying his signet rings (A. 16.19.3). The one person for whom Seneca does give thought nearly succeeds in committing suicide together with him, with his own blessings. This unwillingness or inattention towards saving lives stems from his fatalistic attitude about the emperor's ability to inflict death: "he presents the emperor's murderousness as inevitable and does nothing to suggest that he, or his followers, either could or should stop him."⁶³ Ultimately, in his final moments Seneca fails to provide his audience useful information about the current state of one-man rule, namely, how to survive it.

The little that Seneca does say about Nero and his actions make it clear as to why Seneca, thoroughly absorbed in the preservation of a good legacy, would avoid this subject. Seneca says that his death is a natural consequence of Nero's desire to kill those closest to him. But following that train of thought, it is hard to accept Seneca as an innocent victim: Tacitus tells us earlier in the *Annals* that he was partly responsible for the killing of Agrippina, the mother of Nero. When Nero's assassination plot against her fails, Seneca is the first to suggest that Nero immediately order a second attempt to forestall a response (A. 14.7.3). Tacitus wishes to portray Seneca in his final moments as being intentionally terse on political matters, as Seneca would have understood that any substantial conversation about the state of one-man rule under Nero would, given his own involvement in that regime, necessarily imperil his own future reputation.⁶⁴

⁶³ Wilson (2014) 210.

⁶⁴ Perhaps we should even think that this suicide was important for Seneca's self-reflection on his past career. Cf. Hill (2004) 182: "In this extreme protraction of Seneca's final moments is visible his devotion to suicidal exemplars ... and implicit in this is his concern to attain in death a clarified understanding and vindication of his actions in life."

IVb. The Focus on Creating a Legacy

Not eager to dwell on problems within the inner workings of the state, Seneca instead spends his last moments creating a future legacy for himself through an elaborate and theatrical death. The narrative suggests that this manner of death was long premeditated. The nameless centurion delivering Seneca's death sentence finds him "feasting" (*epulanti*, A. 15.60.4) at his estate in the suburbs of Rome, surrounded by friends, family, and members of his household. Tacitus writes that in those last days before Seneca's death, with the Pisonian conspiracy discovered and several members caught and providing names, "Nero had put even Rome, so to speak, in custody" (*et Urbem ... uelut in custodiam dedit*, A. 15.58.2). The fact that Seneca had assembled such a large group of people during such tense circumstances suggests that he had foreknowledge of some impending outcome to the conspiracy.⁶⁵ Whether he awaited Piso's success or failure, he had at hand a sizeable audience to witness his reaction. The presence of scribes indicates that this was a moment Seneca wished to be captured in writing. When the verdict of death arrived, he was unfazed and was well prepared to perform for this audience a death that consciously mimicked the examples of Socrates and Cato.⁶⁶

The centurion denies Seneca the opportunity to read and execute his will, at which point Seneca declares that he will share with those present, including, importantly, the scribes present at the scene, the only possession that he was now at liberty to leave behind:

⁶⁵ Cf. Ker (2009) 25: "The discovery of Seneca banqueting with friends and wife (*epulanti* suggests festivity) reinforces the impression that he is aware either of the impending success of the conspiracy or of imminent death."

⁶⁶ For the importance of suffering during the process to death, of which Cato is the literary exemplar, cf. Hill (2004): "Such an exemplarity is the only means in Seneca's philosophy whereby the individual might both discover his or her own virtue and make this known to others." Clearly Seneca wishes to make his virtue known to others through his death.

ille interritus poscit testamenti tabulas; ac denegante centurione conuersus ad amicos, quando meritis eorum referre gratiam prohiberetur, quod unum iam et tamen pulcherrimum habeat, imaginem uitae suae relinquere testatur.

That man [i.e., Seneca], unafraid, called for his will; and when the centurion denied him this Seneca turned to his friends [and said that] since he was being prevented from giving thanks for their rightful dues, he was leaving behind for them that which was now the last and yet most beautiful thing he had, the **image of his own life**.

(A. 15.62.1)

Given the context of this situation Seneca's presentation of *imago suae uitae* is not so much a summary of his life, but an attempt to color the future perception of his life through the manner of his death.⁶⁷ The intent of leaving behind an *imago suae uitae* reveals Seneca's desire to control his legacy by having authorship over the narrative of his life and death, to present an *imago* of himself worth honoring and imitating.⁶⁸ We can see that the leaving behind of a legacy is foremost in Seneca's mind at this time from the fact that even in his final conversation with his wife Paulina he sees her willingness to commit suicide with him in terms of accruing *gloria* and creating an *exemplum*. After an initial attempt to persuade her not to commit suicide, he accedes to her demand that they die together:

tum Seneca gloriae eius non aduersus, simul amore, ne sibi unice dilectam ad iniurias relinqueret, uitae, inquit, delenimenta monstraueram tibi, tu mortis decus mauis: non inuidebo exemplo. sit huius tam fortis exitus constantia penes utrosque par, claritudinis plus in tuo fine. post quae eodem ictu brachia ferro exsoluunt.

Then Seneca, not adverse to her glory, at the same time out of love, lest he abandon to harm the woman whom he loved dearly, said, "I had shown you life's allurements, but you prefer the honor of death: I will not begrudge you to be an example. Let the perseverance of so bold a death as this

⁶⁷ Cf. Ker (2009) 288: "Seneca's *imago uitae suae* is implicitly informed by context: the life it encapsulates ends *thus*, in Seneca's death scene, and the *imago* itself is presented during, or by means of, the death event."

⁶⁸ Wilson (2014) 209 understandably reads this passage as a sign of Seneca's presumptuous attitude: "Such sentiments, one might think, would be rather more fitting from the mouth of a friend than from the man himself."

be equal for us both; let there be more brilliance in your end.” After these words they opened their arms’ veins with the same blade cut.

(A. 15.63.2)

Even in a moment of sincere devotion Seneca speaks to his wife not only about achieving posthumous renown together, but about achieving *individual* posthumous renown. Though their suicide will grant them fame, Paulina’s fame will be greater, Seneca says, because it is voluntarily offered. And yet the agonistic nature of their dual suicide has the uncharming effect of suggesting a running total in Seneca’s mind: one scholar notes that he “wastes no time in calculating the *claritudo* she will earn.”⁶⁹

The underlying implication is that Seneca knows that the fame of Paulina’s death will reflect favorably onto himself: first, her death is a show of fierce loyalty to him (“certainly,” writes Edwards, “it reflects well on a man that he inspires such loyalty, such love”⁷⁰); next, since he is her teacher of Stoic precepts, her decision to voluntarily commit suicide would reflect well upon the success of his philosophical teaching. The student-teacher relationship between Seneca and Paulina, implicit in Tacitus,⁷¹ is more explicitly explored in Dio Cassius’s account of Seneca’s death:

ὁ δὲ δὴ Σενέκας ἠθέλησε μὲν καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα Παυλίαν ἀποκτεῖναι, λέγων πεπεικέναι αὐτὴν τοῦ τε θανάτου καταφρονῆσαι καὶ τῆς σὺν αὐτῷ μεταλλαγῆς ἐπιθυμῆσαι, καὶ ἔσχασε καὶ τὰς ἐκείνης φλέβας, δυσθανατίσας δὲ δὴ καὶ πρὸς τὸν ὄλεθρον ὑπὸ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐπειχθεὶς προαπηλλάγη αὐτῆς, καὶ οὕτως ἡ Παυλίνα περιεγένετο. οὐ μέντοι πρότερον ἑαυτοῦ ἤψατο πρὶν τὸ τε βιβλίον ὁ

⁶⁹ Ker (2009) 29.

⁷⁰ Edwards (2007) 196.

⁷¹ On the implication in Tacitus that Paulina’s death was premeditated, cf. Ker (2009) 29: “her death has the appearance of being long prepared for—if not by a pact, then by her implied status as a stellar student of her husband’s philosophy.”

συνέγραφεν ἐπανορθῶσαι καὶ τᾶλλα (ἐδεδίει γὰρ μὴ καὶ ἐς τὸν Νέρωνα ἐλθόντα φθαρῆ) παρακαταθέσθαι τισίν.

Seneca wished to kill his wife Paulina also, saying that he had persuaded her to despise death and to desire to take her leave with him. He opened her veins too. But in reality his death was difficult and he was helped toward his destruction by the soldiers and died before her. And so Paulina survived. But he did not commit to dying until he had revised the book he was writing then and had left the rest of his books with others, since he was afraid that they would fall into Nero's hands and be destroyed.

(62.25.1-2)

In this account the agency of Paulina's death is placed almost entirely in Seneca: *he* wished to kill her, *he* persuaded her, *he* opened her veins. In Dio's account Seneca's role in his attempted wife's suicide is more blatantly self-serving, because he was "even willing to kill his own wife in order to enhance the reputation of his own teaching."⁷² For Seneca her suicide was to serve the same end as the revision and preservation of his books: their purpose was to ensure his survival in the memory of ensuing generations. This account makes Seneca's attitude towards his wife's suicide quite callous, but is the substance greatly different from the account that Tacitus provides? Though Dio Cassius' typically hostile attitude towards Seneca must be taken into account when reading this passage, even in Tacitus Seneca's desire for glory is intertwined with his morbid admiration for his wife's decision to commit suicide with him.⁷³ One suspects that Tacitus' Seneca, too, was hoping that his wife would choose suicide over life without him.

His goal to create a legacy through a memorable and theatrical death is also apparent in his attempt to commit suicide by hemlock in imitation of Socrates (A. 15.64.3). His doctor is on hand and the hemlock "long since prepared" (*provisum pridem venenum*); both facts suggest

⁷² Wilson (2014) 208.

⁷³ For Dio's hostility towards Seneca, cf. Ker (2009) 35-39. For an alternative view of Dio, as providing favorable and hostile sources "with no attempt to harmonize," cf. Griffin (1976) 428-433.

premeditation, though the poison was presumably a backup measure to the blade with which he cut his wrists and the back of his knees. But perhaps the most telling scene in Tacitus' account, the one that best encapsulates Seneca's intent for his suicide, is that in which Seneca is shown dictating final thoughts to scribes gathered specifically for this purpose:

et nouissimo quoque momento suppeditante eloquentia aduocatis scriptoribus pleraque tradidit, quae in uulgis edita eius uerbis inuertere supersedeo.

And even at the very last minute, with his eloquence fully at hand, writers were called in and he dictated to them many things, which, distributed among the masses in his own words, I decline to paraphrase.

(A. 15.63.3)

Seneca is striving to create in himself a new embodiment of the Stoic martyr in the type of Socrates or Cato, but his effort seems too self-consciously aimed at earning renown, too aware of its own less-than-philosophical purpose. He has, in effect, begun to matter more than the words he says, and this may be the latent sentiment behind Tacitus' decision to include this particular scene while omitting the particular words spoken at that moment (*inuertere supersedeo*)—this decision by Tacitus I will discuss further below. In his death Seneca requested that an *imago uitae suae* be passed down; assenting to the letter, but not the spirit, of Seneca's request, Tacitus has captured an *imago* that depicts a vain man, a portrait of one dying an *ambitiosa mors*.

IVc. The Survivor's Legacy

The last mentioned passage above includes an unusually explicit editorial comment by Tacitus. Much has been written about Tacitus' decision not to reproduce these words dictated by Seneca, and various motives have been offered as explanations, ranging from near reverence of Seneca's

writing to snide mockery of his attempt to control his postmortem reputation.⁷⁴ Whatever is implied by the omission, the transition from it to the following passage suddenly jerks readers from Seneca's death to a digression on the life of Paulina following Seneca's death, momentarily breaking the chronology of the narrative:

at Nero nullo in Paulinam proprio odio, ac ne glisceret inuidia crudelitas, iubet inhiberi mortem. hortantibus militibus serui libertique obligant brachia, premunt sanguinem, incertum an ignarae. nam, ut est uulgus ad deteriora promptum, non defuere qui crederent, donec implacabilem Neronem timuerit, famam sociatae cum marito mortis petiuisse, deinde oblata mitiore spe blandimentis uitae euictam; cui addidit paucos postea annos, laudabili in maritum memoria et ore ac membris in eum pallorem albensibus, ut ostentui esset multum uitalis spiritus egestum.

But Nero, having no personal enmity against Paulina, and so that his hatred for his cruelty might not grow, ordered her death to be halted. At the soldiers' encouragements the slaves and freedmen bound her arms and stopped the blood. It is disputed whether she was conscious, because, since the masses are inclined towards the worse, there were those who believed that, as long as she feared that Nero was unappeasable, she had sought the reputation of a death shared with her husband; then, with a milder expectation offered, she was overcome by the pleasures of life. To it she added a few years in praiseworthy memory of her husband, her face and limbs blanching to a hue that served as a sign that much of her vital spirit was lost.

(A. 15.64.1-2)

The jarring break in narrative signaled by *at* diverts the focus away from Seneca to Paulina, and the sudden change from one scene to another naturally suggests a comparison—recall that a competition between the two was even anticipated by Seneca earlier (*claritudinis plus in tuo fine*, A. 15.63.2). Here the narrative seems to force a sort of *synkrisis* between husband and wife. Her fate is juxtaposed next to her husband's: while Seneca dies, she lives, and an *agon* develops over the good each person contributes to the state.

Tacitus interrupts the narrative to record that in a surprisingly merciful and politic move Nero prevented Paulina from committing suicide. He then recounts a rumor that arose among the

⁷⁴ For select interpretations of this passage, cf. Edwards (2007) 109-112; Ker (2009) 31-33; Wilson (2014) 210.

uulgus (the people or the masses) that she had allowed herself to be rescued when she had realized that Nero had no wish to see her dead. Ker believes that this rumor “must infuse some ambiguity into our reading of [Tacitus’] following statements about Paulina’s afterlife.”⁷⁵ I, however, believe that Tacitus is refuting this rumor by pointing out the unreliability of its source. The parenthetical statement preceding, essentially qualifying, the rumor strongly suggests that the rumor ought not to be believed: “since the masses are inclined towards the **worse**” (*ut est uulgus ad **deteriora** promptum*). The substantive use of *deterior* often connotes in Tacitus things that are worse in the sense that they are “less right or correct.”⁷⁶ Perhaps the best example of *deterior* being used in this way occurs in a passage from Tacitus’ excursus on historiography in Book 4. There Tacitus says that it is worthwhile to write about the nature of one man rule “because few men discern wisdom and decency from **worse things**, useful from harmful things” (*quia pauci prudentia honesta ab **deterioribus**, utilia ab noxiis discernunt*, A. 4.33.2). One part of the didactic role of history is to discourage wrong actions and beliefs with past precedents. One of these wrong beliefs is presumably that which was held by the masses concerning Paulina and her life after Seneca’s suicide: for Tacitus, if I am understanding *deteriora* here correctly, her life was better spared than lost with Seneca’s. However, Seneca’s writings, which Tacitus omits to

⁷⁵ Ker (2009) 30-31. For similar arguments for Tacitus’ ambiguity, cf. Edwards (2007) 196: “Tacitus leaves this issue [of whether she was complicit or un-complicit in her rescue] unresolved.”

⁷⁶ As opposed to connoting things that are merely not preferable or more cynical. For other uses of *deteriora* meaning “less than right or correct” cf. the following examples provided by Gerber and Greef (*deterior* a):

- a) Tiberius imputing false motives to Germanicus’ actions along the Rhine: *Tiberio haud probatum, seu cuncta Germanici in **deterius** trahenti* (A. 1.62.2).
- b) Reaction to exaggerated reports from Syria about the illness of Germanicus: *At Romae, postquam Germanici ualitudo percrebuit cunctaque ut ex longinquo aucta in **deterius** adferebantur* (A. 2.82.1).
- c) Piso’s thoughts on the ability of one man to ignore biases: *ueraque aut in **deterius** credita iudice ab uno facilius discerni, odium et inuidiam apud multos ualere* (A. 3.10.2).

replicate in this passage, and which most likely justified and praised suicide (especially Seneca's own), presumably did little to correct the masses' belief that Paulina abandoned suicide out of cowardice. Indeed, there appears to be a connection in what the public consumes and towards what conclusions it is inclined:

Description of Seneca's final words:

*aduocatis scriptoribus pleraque tradidit, quae in **uulgus** edita eius uerbis ...* (A. 15.63.3)

The faulty thinking of the public:

*nam, ut est **uulgus** ad deteriora promptum, non defuere qui crederent ...* (A. 15.64.2)

Though *in uulgus* is a fairly common phrase meaning "generally" or "widely," the reuse of the word shortly thereafter colors the previous use of the word.⁷⁷ Seneca's final words are *widely* distributed, while it is *widely* believed that the fact that Paulina did not commit suicide reflected badly on her character. The repetition of *uulgus* in such close proximity may suggest that Tacitus is conferring some responsibility onto Seneca for the public's mistaken view concerning Paulina, for possessing *deteriora* thoughts against her survival.

Counter to the masses' belief is the account of her life which Tacitus offers in its place, that Paulina had lived out the rest of her short life in "praiseworthy memory of her husband." Seneca believed that she, and he himself through her, would receive renown through suicide, but it turned out that renown was also attainable through survival. Seneca's prediction that her end would have more *claritudo* seems to come ironically true even without her dying: she was so

⁷⁷ Cf. *OLD* (vulgus 1b).

pale afterwards, Tacitus writes, that her body vividly signified her loyalty to Seneca.⁷⁸ The physicality of the survivor's body is even more poignant when compared to the ultimate end of Seneca's body, which is immediately cremated upon death (A. 15.64.4).

Ultimately, Paulina's survival offers the possibility of an alternative end to the rampant suicide narratives of the early Imperial period. Moreover, she exemplifies the ideal manner of living under a *malus princeps* in two ways: first, Nero's decision to save Paulina stems from the fact that she had never made an overt effort to incur his anger (*Nero nullo in Paulinam proprio odio*); second, because her killing in no way could be justified by Nero, her suicide attempt had the practical effect of causing him to have concern for his public image (*ne glisceret inuidia crudelitas*) and thereby of moderating his passions, just as Tacitus says Agricola moderated Domitian's (Agr. 42.4-5). Through this second way we see that Paulina has actually done the state under one man rule a beneficial service by showing that even Nero could be reasoned with. It is also worth pointing out that there is some debate as to whether Nero was directly responsible for the intervention in Paulina's death. Ker finds it implausible that Nero, being four miles away, could have responded promptly enough to save Paulina's life.⁷⁹ He recommends the idea that the soldiers present (*hortantibus militibus*) prevented her suicide by spontaneous intervention. However, Tacitus' decision to follow whatever source and impute this intervention to Nero is all the more evidence that Tacitus wished to show the effects of Paulina's character on Nero, that one's good character can have positive influences on even a *malus princeps*.

⁷⁸ For the *claritudo* as the physical property of brightness or pallor, cf. OLD 2a, b. Tacitus himself provides a parallel: in Book 1, soldiers panicking during a lunar eclipse cry out for the "brightness and pallor of the goddess (i.e. the moon)" to return (*fulgor et claritudo deae*, A. 1.28.1).

⁷⁹ Ker (2009) 31.

Seneca had spent much of life taking thought for death, and in Tacitus' account he spares no effort to die a picturesque Stoic death.⁸⁰ Though Tacitus does appear to show some respect for Seneca's legacy in this passage⁸¹—the vividness of the account, the tender moments with his wife, the dogged determination to die even after multiple setbacks—nevertheless, the dramatic flair of this passage will have us in agreement with Griffin: “we may find Seneca's display of eloquence at the last minute ludicrous.”⁸² The moments of ludicrousness in this passage underscore the vanity with which Seneca sought private glory over public utility.

I have offered three reasons why Tacitus may have believed that Seneca's suicide, for all the glory that he may have received through it, was an *ambitiosa mors*. I have argued that, first, Seneca fails to give constructive criticism at the moment in which he was free to speak at will; second, he uses that moment instead to see to it that he will be glorified through his works, namely his books and perhaps even the suicide of his wife; third, Paulina survives both to keep Seneca's memory well and simultaneously to benefit the state, which signals Tacitus' preference for the useful living rather than the useless dead. With these three criteria in mind, I will return to and examine the *Annals*' account of Cordus' death, and I will argue that it too constitutes in Tacitus' mind an *ambitiosa mors*.

⁸⁰ Due to his weak constitution and constant illness, suicide was apparently ever present in Seneca's mind. For Seneca's reflection on the inevitability of his death in philosophical works, cf. Edwards (2007) 100-112.

⁸¹ Tacitus' account certainly offers a more positive portrayal of Seneca's death than Dio Cassius', leading Wilson (2014) 208 to surmise that “Tacitus' account ... seems to follow a much more sympathetic source.”

⁸² Griffin (1976) 442.

V. The Trial and Death of Cordus

With the proper context for interpreting Tacitus' feelings towards Cordus now properly established, we may finally begin to examine his speech in Book 4. I will begin this section by providing again, for the sake of convenience, the Latin text and a translation of Cordus' speech.

Latin Text of Cordus' Speech (A. 4.34-35)

[34] *Cornelio Cossio Asinio Agrippa consulibus Cremutius Cordus postulatur nouo ac tunc primum audito crimine, quod editis annalibus laudatoque M. Bruto C. Cassium Romanorum ultimum dixisset. accusabant Satrius Secundus et Pinarius Natta, Seiani clientes. [34.2] id perniciosum reo et Caesar truci uultu defensionem accipiens, quam Cremutius, relinquendae uitae certus, in hunc modum exorsus est:*

“uerba mea, patres conscripti, arguuntur, adeo factorum innocens sum. sed neque haec in principem aut principis parentem, quos lex maiestatis amplectitur: Brutum et Cassium laudauisse dicor, quorum res gestas cum plurimi composuerint, nemo sine honore memorauit. [34.3] Titus Liuius, eloquentiae ac fidei praeclarus in primis, Cn. Pompeium tantis laudibus tulit, ut Pompeianum eum Augustus appellaret, neque id amicitiae eorum offecit. Scipionem, Afranium, hunc ipsum Cassium, hunc Brutum nusquam latrones et parricidas, quae nunc uocabula inponuntur, saepe ut insignis uiros nominat.

[34.4] *Asinii Pollionis scripta egregiam eorundem memoriam tradunt, Messalla Coruinus imperatorem suum Cassium praedicabat, et uterque opibusque atque honoribus peruigere. Marci Ciceronis libro, quo Catonem caelo aequauit, quid aliud dictator Caesar quam rescripta oratione, uelut apud iudices, respondit? [34.5] Antonii epistulae, Bruti contiones falsa quidem in Augustum probra, sed multa cum acerbitate habent; carmina Bibaculi et Catulli referta contumeliis Caesarum leguntur, sed ipse diuus Iulius, ipse diuus Augustus et tulere ista et reliquere, haud facile dixerim, moderatione magis an sapientia. namque sprete exolescunt: si irascere, adgnita uidentur.*

[35] *non attingo Graecos, quorum non modo libertas, etiam libido impunita; aut si quis advertit, dictis dicta ultus est. sed maxime solutum et sine obtrectatore fuit prodere de iis, quos mors odio aut gratiae exemisset. [35.2] num enim armatis Cassio et Bruto ac Philippenses campos obtinentibus belli ciuilibus causa populum per contiones incendio? an illi quidem septuagesimum ante annum perempti, quo modo imaginibus suis noscuntur, quas ne uictor quidem aboleuit, sic*

partem memoriae apud scriptores retinent? [35.3] suum cuique decus posteritas rependit, nec derunt, si damnatio ingruit, qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, sed etiam mei meminerint.”

[35.4] egressus dein senatu uitam abstinentia finiuit. libros per aediles cremandos censuere patres, et manserunt occultati et editi. [35.5] quo magis socordiam eorum inridere libet, qui praesenti potentia credunt extingui posse etiam sequentis aevi memoriam. nam contra punitis ingeniis gliscit auctoritas, neque aliud externi reges, aut qui eadem saeuitia usi sunt, nisi dedecus sibi atque illis gloriam peperere.

Translation of Cordus' Speech

[34] Cornelius Cossus and Asinius Agrippa consuls. Cremutius Cordus was prosecuted for a new and then first heard charge, that, with annals published and M. Brutus praised, he had called C. Cassius the last of the Romans. His accusers were Satrius Secundus and Pinarius Natta, Sejanus' clients. [34.2] This proved ruinous for the defendant, as did Caesar's grim appearance while listening to the defense speech, which Cremutius, set on abandoning his life, began in this way:

“My words, senators, are disputed, that's how innocent I am of deeds. But these words have been directed towards neither the emperor nor the emperor's parent, whom the treason law covers: I am said to have praised Brutus and Cassius, about whose accomplishments many have written and no one has recalled without honor. [34.3] Titus Livy, among the most brilliant in eloquence and loyalty, gave Pompey such praises that Augustus dubbed him a Pompeian, and this did not affect their friendship. Scipio, Afranius, this very Cassius, this Brutus, nowhere does he call them bandits or traitors (these are the labels now imposed), but he often calls them distinguished men.

[34.4] Asinius Pollio's writings pass down an outstanding memory of these same men, Messalla Corvinus used to declare Cassius his commander, and both these men thrived in wealth and honors. In response to Marcus Cicero's book, in which he lifted Cato to the sky, what else did Caesar do as dictator than write a speech, as if before a jury? [34.5] Antony's letters, Brutus' speeches, definitely false and slanderous towards Augustus, are very bitter. The poems of Bibaclus and Catullus are filled with invectives against the Caesars, but the divine Julius and Augustus both bore and left them alone, I cannot say with more moderation or wisdom. For things, once spurned, disappear; if one grows angry, they seem acknowledged.

[35] I am not talking about the Greeks, not only whose freedom of speech, but even pleasure are unpunished; if anyone cared, he avenged words with words. But things were very lax and no one objected to writing about those whom death had released from hate or gratitude. [35.2] For, with Cassius and Brutus armed and holding the fields of Philippi, am I firing up the people for civil

war through assemblies? Or do not those men, seventy years dead, just as they are recognized by their images, which not even the victor abolished, thus keep a share of memory in writers? [35.3] Posterity reevaluates each person's worth, and there will be those, if conviction comes, who remember not only Cassius and Brutus, but even me."

[35.4] Having left the senate, he ended his life with starvation. The books had to be burned by the aediles, senators decreed, but they remained hidden and published. [35.5] All the more pleasing is it to mock the stupidity of those who believe that with present power even the following age's memory can be extinguished. On the contrary, the authority of punished geniuses grows, and foreign kings or those who practice like savagery prepare nothing but dishonor for themselves and glory for the dead.

Va. The Failure to Address True Causes

Tacitus begins the narrative of Cordus' trial and death with two important pieces of information concerning its causes: first, he was arraigned on a "new and then first heard charge" (*nouo ac tunc primum audito crimine*); second, his accusers were clients of Sejanus (*Seiani clientes*). These two facts, in two different ways, account for the reasons why Cordus is on trial, and readers would assume that in the defense speech to follow Cordus would address both causes. However, as we shall see, Cordus discusses one of these causes, the nature of the new charge being leveled at him, to the near exclusion of the other. Cordus omits the other, perhaps more important, cause, the role of Sejanus in orchestrating the charge against him. This omission, I will argue, has import for our understanding of Tacitus' portrayal of Cremutius Cordus.

Charges of *maiestas* brought against texts were nothing new by 25 CE, the year in which this trial takes place. Tacitus writes that Augustus was the first to arraign authors of subversive literature under the *lex maiestatis*. The first offender is said to have been Cassius Severus (A. 1.72.3), whose notorious reputation in Tacitus and Suetonius as writer and orator we have already discussed above. The novelty of Cordus' charge lay, rather, in the fact that his was the

first work of history prosecuted under the *lex maiestatis*, as well as that his was the first to be charged for encomiastic, rather than critical or slanderous, language (*quod editis annalibus laudatoque M. Bruto C. Cassium Romanorum ultimum dixisset*).⁸³ As these were the charges brought against him, much of Cordus' speech appropriately aims at defending the idea that a historical work praising the opponents of the Caesars does not necessarily in turn criticize the Caesars. In one sense, then, Cordus' speech addresses an important cause of the trial: by praising Brutus and Cassius he was thought to be simultaneously criticizing Augustus and, by extension, Tiberius.

The second piece of information that Tacitus provides in the beginning of the Cordus narrative gives readers another, quite different cause for Cordus' trial, one that cannot be sufficiently understood by the substance of the accusation alone—the persons and motives behind the accusation must be understood. His accusers were clients of Sejanus, a man of great influence with Tiberius (*magna apud Tiberium auctoritate*, A. 1.24.2) and an integral part of the turn in Tiberius' reign towards the worse.⁸⁴ Book 4, as I have already discussed, begins with a brief biography of Sejanus and an overview of “how he managed to seize absolute power” (*quo facinore dominationem raptum ierit*, A. 4.1.1), marking the beginning of his precipitous rise to power. Much of the parts of Book 4 that recount domestic events demonstrate the extent of Sejanus' influence in Rome; Cordus' trial is just such an example of Sejanus' power.

It was most likely through Sejanus' great influence that such a novel charge was successfully prosecuted, as Tacitus claims that his affiliation with the accusers was enough to

⁸³ Bauman (1967) 268-271.

⁸⁴ Martin (1981) 129 on the beginning of Book 4, the turn in Tiberius' rule and the related rise of Sejanus: “The opening sentence of Book 4 affirms that in the year 23 the reign of Tiberius took a perceptible turn for the worse; the next sentence ascribes the change to the influence that Sejanus now began to exert on the emperor.”

prove fatal to Cordus: “his accusers were Satrius Secundus and Pinarius Natta, Sejanus’ clients. **This** [i.e., that Sejanus was their patron] proved ruinous for the defendant ...” (*accusabant Satrius Secundus et Pinarius Natta, Seiani clientes. id perniciosabile reo ...*).⁸⁵ Moreover, the preeminence of Sejanus’ authority is evident from the fact that the trial seems to have been all but decided before it could take place, even before Tiberius could provide his judgment with visible displeasure (*truci uultu defensionem accipiens*). This merely confirmed Cordus’ guilty sentence as a *fait accompli*.⁸⁶

Given that the rise of Sejanus and the increase of his influence is a prominent theme of Book 4, readers should suspect that the connection of his name to Cordus’ accusers suggests a more than nominal involvement in this affair. The implication is that Sejanus had reasons for seeing Cordus prosecuted for *maiestas*, a charge that resulted in either banishment or death for the defendant. Though Tacitus merely hints at animosity between the two, other sources of Cordus’ death confirm an openly inimical relationship. Dio Cassius records rather briskly that Cordus had been forced to kill himself because “he had given offense to Sejanus” (ὅτι τῷ Σεϊανῷ προσέκρουσεν, 57.4.2). Seneca, however, provides a much fuller account of their past dealings with one another in the *De Consolatione ad Marciam*. In that account Seneca identifies an event that took place three years before the trial as the beginning of the contention between the two men:

propone illud acerbissimum tibi tempus, quo Seianus patrem tuum clienti suo Satrio Secundo congiarium dedit. irascebatur illi ob unum aut alterum liberius dictum, quod tacitus ferre non potuerat Seianum in ceruices nostras ne inponi quidem sed escendere. decernebatur illi statua in

⁸⁵ Bauman (1996) 62 describes the increase of Sejanus’ power through the use of the *lex maiestatis* in trials such as that of Cordus: “Sejanus made the *lex maiestatis* a fine-tuned instrument.”

⁸⁶ Strunk (2017) 159-160: “In the face of such opposition, the outcome of the trial was predetermined.”

Pompei theatro ponenda, quod exustum Caesar reficiebat: exclamavit Cordus tunc uere theatrum perire.

Consider that terribly bitter time for you, when Sejanus gave his client Satrius Secundus your father as a gift. He was angry at your father on account of a word or two said rather freely, because he had been unable to bear in silence that Sejanus was not just placed, but even mounted himself, upon our necks. A statue for that man to be placed in Pompey's theater, which Tiberius Caesar was rebuilding since it had burned down, was being decreed: Cordus exclaimed then that the theater was really done for.

(*ad Marc.* 22.4)

In this passage Cordus fully exhibits his Republican inclinations with a quip against Sejanus. Cordus insinuates that to place a statue of Sejanus, an enemy of the Republic by virtue of being an integral part of the principate, in the theater of Pompey, the leading member of the senatorial and Republican faction during the civil wars, would defame the theater's namesake and the cause for which Pompey fought.⁸⁷ Sejanus silences Cordus by turning his apparently well-known Republican sentiments against him. Here, as in several other places already discussed, we see that Cordus is quite capable of expressing his political leanings polemically. This very vocal opposition against Sejanus and the imperial government that had enabled his rise casts doubt on his claim in Tacitus' account of his speech that his works are in no way directed against the Caesars (*sed neque haec in principem aut principis parentem*, A. 4.34.2).

Cordus' trial owes, in an important sense, its cause to the hostility of Sejanus, as well as to that of Tiberius, under whose reign he is condemned and who fails to act justly on Cordus' behalf. It is surprising, then, that neither is mentioned by Cordus either for the purpose of invective or appeal in his defense speech: "both [Sejanus] and Tib. are conspicuous by their

⁸⁷ Cf. Livy's praise for Pompey leading to his moniker *Pompeianus* from Augustus (A. 4.34.3). For the early imperial views on Pompey, cf. Woodman (1989) 179: "early-imperial writers tended to glorify [Pompey] as a heroic soldier-citizen whose death had been a tragedy, while at the same time they criticised the *Pompeiani* who under his banner had resisted Caesar and Octavian."

absence from Cordus' speech."⁸⁸ It is all the more surprising that Cordus fails to mention either Sejanus or Tiberius when Tacitus explicitly states that Cordus understood perfectly well that he was doomed. The power of Sejanus' hostility, along with Tiberius' clear disapproval, Tacitus writes, resolved Cordus to his death (*relinquendae uitae certus*), and his speech was delivered with the full knowledge that nothing could sway the impending judgment. Cordus had nothing to lose in criticizing Sejanus or Tiberius and was thereby granted an opportunity to air his Republican sentiments.

Like Seneca, Cordus is afforded a chance before his death to voice discontent without fear of censorship. Strunk believes that "[Cordus'] trial and imminent death free him to speak frankly."⁸⁹ Again, the self-declared aim of Tacitus' historical project is to provide a helpful account of life under "one man rule" (*si unus imperitet*, A. 4.33.2), and to make his readers, living under imperial power, like those who were "clever and wise about the times" during the periods of popular and senatorial hegemony.⁹⁰ Here Cordus is permitted to give just such a helpful service to the state by pointing out the dangerous influence of Sejanus, much as he did in opposing the erection of Sejanus' statue in Pompey's theater. Like Seneca, however, who shied away from criticizing Nero, Cordus is portrayed here by Tacitus as doing little to address and alleviate the underlying problems that ultimately lead to his demise. And like Seneca, Cordus has resolutely set his mind on his future reputation, not participating in the present in which he could effect change.

⁸⁸ Martin and Woodman (1989) 178 also notes that the verbs that begin Cordus' speech are "studiedly passive (2 *uerba arguuntur, dicor*)."

⁸⁹ Strunk (2017) 160.

⁹⁰ *igitur ut olim, plebe ualida, uel cum patres pollerent, noscenda uulgi natura, et quibus modis temperanter haberetur, senatusque et optimatum ingenia qui maxime perdidicerant, callidi temporum et sapientes credebantur, sic conuerso status, neque alia re Roma<ana>, quam si unus imperitet ...*(A. 4.33.2)

Vb. The Focus on Creating a Legacy

Just as the account of Seneca's last moments reflects the legacy he hoped to leave behind (i.e., an *imago uitae suae* of a Stoic martyr like Socrates or Cato), Cordus' speech reflects the legacy he hopes to impart to posterity. Rather than discussing the pernicious effects of Sejanus on Tiberius and the imperial system, Cordus directs his speech towards the issue of censorship, challenging the merits of the "new and then first heard charge" (*nouo ac tunc primum audito crimine*). Cordus chooses to dwell on this charge because he wishes to leave behind an *imago uitae suae* of being a proponent of *Libertas*, freedom of speech.⁹¹ However, he exhibits loftier aims than being a historian known for his praise of Brutus and Cassius: he desires to be praised as a historical figure himself. The last sentence of his speech reveals his ambitions: "there will be those who remember not only Cassius and Brutus, but even me" (*nec derunt ... qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, sed etiam mei meminerint*, A. 4.35.3). This emphatic end to the speech is his Philippi, and it recalls the willingness to die that Tacitus mentions at the beginning of his speech (*relinquendae uitae certus*, A. 4.34.2).

Cordus enters into his speech with this mindset, namely to defend *libertas* at the cost of his own life. Such a dramatic portrayal of a historian is unique in the *Annals*, and it is all the more noteworthy as Cordus' trial and death follows directly on the heels of Tacitus' excursus on historiography, in which he lays out his own historiographical methods.⁹² Many scholars, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, have wished to read the speech of Cordus

⁹¹ Though Tacitus never calls Cordus a "proponent of *Libertas*," the common interpretation of this speech as a "defense of *Libertas*" is explained by Moles (1998) 141: "The overall logic of the argument is sufficiently clear. Cordus upholds the general right of freedom of speech ... here specifically the right of praising those defeated by the Caesars."

⁹² Wisse (2013) 320: "the mention of Cremutius' annals as central to the charge immediately provides a parallel between him and Tacitus himself, continuing the focus on historiography of the preceding discussion."

here as a mirror to Tacitus' own thoughts on the subjects about which Cordus discourses. Upon a closer look at the juxtaposition, however, the historiographical projects of Cordus and Tacitus differ in significant ways, and these differences amount to a critique of the *imago uitae* that Cordus wishes to leave behind through this speech. Much of these differences depend on the aspects of Tacitus' political views that I have discussed above, such as his aversion to "empty boasts of freedom" (*inani iactatione libertatis*, Ag. 42.4), and his dislike of those who obtain renown through "ostentatious deaths" (*ambitiosa morte*, Ag. 42.5). These sentiments will greatly inform his attitude towards Cordus and his speech.

Cordus' defense of *libertas* begins with the well-known dichotomy of words and deeds: "my words, senators, are disputed, that's how innocent I am of deeds" (*uerba mea, patres conscripti, arguuntur, adeo factorum innocens sum*, A. 4.34.2). He revisits the claim that he is guiltless of any *facta* near the end of the speech, where he asks the rhetorical question whether he was "inciting the people to civil war in public assemblies" (*num ... belli ciuilis causa populum per contiones incendo?*, A. 4.35.2). From the very beginning of his speech to its end Cordus shows that he is quite out of step with the historical and political situation in Rome. The difference in culpability of *uerba* and of *facta* under the *lex maiestatis*, a difference, Tacitus writes, that was quite stark in the days of the Republic (*facta arguebantur, dicta impune erant*, A. 1.72.2), had been begun eroding under Augustus' reign. Cassius Severus, who makes a brief reappearance in Book 4's narrative only a few chapters before Cordus' trial (A. 4.21.3), is a double-edged reminder of imperial policy on defamatory writing against the *princeps*: his exile recalls not only the erosion of free speech, but also the polemical and slanderous language that drove Augustus, considering the needs for stability in government, to such a measure.⁹³

⁹³ For an interpretation of Augustus' increasing severity towards inflammatory pamphleteers as being "in the public interest," cf. Bauman (1996) 53. I believe that Tacitus' own belief is that while Augustus was justified in broadening

This is the political environment in which Cordus attempts to make a clear distinction between his *uerba* and *facta*. His attempt shows ignorance about or willful resistance to the changed political climate, for the state *had* changed, as Tacitus makes clear in the excursus on historiography, (*conuerso statu*, A. 4.33.2). Strunk concurs, and says that Cordus believed wrongly that a clear distinction between *uerba* and *facta* could be made for his case at this time: “Cremutius was wrong, however, to claim that he was innocent, for the Principate was a changed world. ... Cremutius’ pleas were thus not in step with the historical reality.”⁹⁴ Here one of the major differences between Cordus’ and Tacitus’ political views begins to take shape, and this difference ultimately shapes their views on the function of history: the former looks back and stubbornly attempts to preserve the ideals of the Republican past, whereas the latter advocates for a cleverness and wisdom about the present (*callidi temporum et sapientes*, A. 4.33.2) that enables one to walk the narrow line of cooperation between toadyism and defiance.⁹⁵

Cordus’ openly Republican leanings painted him as a target for his enemies.⁹⁶ His accusers charged him with praising Brutus and calling Cassius the last of the Romans in his histories. The polemic force of praising the last proponents of the Republic is quite evident, as John Moles explains:

the scope and power of the *lex maiestatis*, his successors abused what Augustus had sincerely hoped would help bring stability to the post-civil war period.

⁹⁴ Strunk (2017) 160 argues that Tacitus is ultimately portraying Cordus favorably, and yet also says that Cordus is still out of step with the political climate in Rome. He also brings up an example from Book I, illustrating Tacitus’ belief that the state had been drastically changed (1.4.1, *verso ciuitatis statu*).

⁹⁵ The best examples of these moderates are Agricola and Marcus Lepidus (A. 4.20.2-3). Martin and Woodman (1989) 190 points out that Tacitus’ praise for Lepidus is “unqualified”—a rarity for Tacitus.

⁹⁶ The accounts of Suetonius and Seneca, which I have discussed above, suggest that Cordus was not at all shy about his Republican beliefs, e.g., his joke against the statue of Sejanus (*ad Marc.* 22.4).

The salutation of Cassius as the last of the Romans actually implies the most radical of political claims, namely that the Republic *was* Rome and that with the fall of the Republic Rome is spiritually and politically dead.⁹⁷

Cordus' praise of Brutus and Cassius was understandably interpreted or construed by Tiberius and Sejanus as an attack against the Caesars, but Cordus in his speech argues that praise of one does not necessarily entail the rebuke of another.⁹⁸ He denies that he has actively attacked the Caesars in his work, but neither does he deny his pro-Republican sentiments. Thus, we see once again Cordus' willingness to stand and associate with the Republicans (though without overtly stating this stance). In contrast, Tacitus knows that such open and direct partisanship is foolhardy and contributes nothing to the good functioning of the state. Tacitus ends the excursus on historiography with a comment that shows an understanding of the implications of writing praise, that praise of someone is unavoidably interpreted as rebuke of another:

at multorum, qui Tiberio regente poenam uel infamias subiere, posteri manent, utque familiae ipsae iam extinctae sint, reperies, qui ob similitudinem morum aliena malefacta sibi obiectari putent. etiam gloria ac uirtus infensos habet, ut nimis ex propinquo diuersa arguens.

But the descendants of many of those who underwent punishment or dishonor during Tiberius' reign remain, and though the families themselves have now been wiped out, **you will find those who believe that the bad deeds of others are being imputed on to them on account of a similarity in character. Even glory and virtue has its detractors, as if too nearly arguing their opposites.**

(A. 4.33.4)

⁹⁷ Moles (1998) 28.

⁹⁸ Martin and Woodman (1989) 179 points out that Cordus' work "was not critical but encomiastic (*laudauisse dicor*). He thus seeks to apply the age-old dichotomy between encomium (*laus*) and censure (*uituperatio*) which permeated all ancient society and its literature. ... The only remaining question was whether Cordus, by praising, had intended criticism."

Though Tacitus' statement above is specific to the descendants of those who lived through Tiberius' reign, this principle applies to all encomia during the principate: praise of someone *will* (note the future tense of *reperies*) be construed as an attack against another.

Especially and most dangerously during the principate, praise of someone other than the emperor could easily be construed as an attack against the emperor. Tacitus explores in the *Agricola* the emperor's dilemma of having in his employ a servant more popular and successful than himself. There he analyzes the mindset of Domitian following Agricola's impressive victories in Britain: "This was a seriously dreadful thing for Domitian, that the name of a subject be raised higher than the emperor" (*id sibi* [i.e., Domitian] *maxime formidolosum, priuati hominis nomen supra principem adtolli*, Ag. 39.2).⁹⁹ Tacitus understood that praise of others would incur the anger of the emperor out of jealousy and fear for his station. That Cordus does not, or seems not, to take this into consideration in his speech shows either, again, ignorance about the current political situation in Rome, or an intentional goading of the emperor to action.

In praising Brutus and Cassius, Cordus sidles up to illustrious company, citing examples of eminent Roman *literati* who praised Brutus and Cassius: "many have written about their deeds, but no one has commemorated them without honor" (*quorum res gestas cum plurimi composuerint, nemo sine honore memorauit*, A.4.34.2). His literary aspirations to join the ranks of such writers like Livy, Asinius Pollio, and Cicero are, however, only a step towards his larger ambitions. His wish to elevate himself to something far greater than a historian shows at the end of his speech, where, as I have mentioned earlier, his final words reveal the height of his aim: "there will be those who remember not only Cassius and Brutus, but also me" (*qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, sed etiam mei meminerint*, A. 4.35.3). The renown of Brutus and Cassius still

⁹⁹ For *priuatus* as not meaning "private," i.e., non-office holding citizen, cf. Woodman (2014) 287.

flourished among Roman aristocrats in those days, as Cordus well understood (A. 4.35.2), and Cordus, too, wished to attain that level of recognition among the Romans with his own, desperate last stand.¹⁰⁰

Tacitus, meanwhile, maintains a distance from such ambitions, and the differences between the two historians' aims become stark when placed in juxtaposition. In the excursus on historiography he discourages his readers from comparing his works to his predecessors in the Roman historiographical tradition: "let no one compare my annals with the writing of those who have written down the Roman people's accomplishments of old" (*sed nemo annales nostros cum scriptura eorum contenderit, qui ueteres populi Romani res composuere*, A. 4.32.1). He claims that his works contain little of the scintillating material of the past historians (A. 4.32.1, 33.3) and only the repetitive, dreary occurrences of a far less exciting period of history (A. 4.33.3). Martin and Woodman believe that Tacitus is here affecting humility¹⁰¹—but even as affectation, Tacitus provides an example, through himself, of a historian who at least nominally seeks to avoid partisanship and the attainment of glory through irresponsibly biased works. He opines that his *Annals* are "a task narrow in scope and inglorious" (*in arto et inglorius labor*, A. 4.32.2), whereas Cordus earns glory from those who punish him (A. 4.35.5).

¹⁰⁰ In order to show the fame of Brutus and Cassius during Tiberius' reign Tacitus ends Book 3 of the *Annals* with a remark on the absence of Brutus' and Cassius' *imagines* at the death of Junia, wife of Cassius and sister of Brutus: *sed praefulgebant Cassius atque Brutus eo ipso quod effigies eorum non uisebantur* (A. 3.76.2).

Martin and Woodman (1989) 184 believes that this passage weakens Cordus' argument that his work relates the fame of Brutus and Cassius in a way similar to statues of them (*quo modo imaginibus suis noscuntur ... sic partem memoriae apud scriptores retinent?*, A. 4.35.2): "the fact that it was still too dangerous to allow [Brutus' and Cassius'] *imagines* to be displayed publicly undermines the validity of the analogy on which his present argument is based."

¹⁰¹ Martin and Woodman (1989) 170-171: "Historians regularly claimed to rival and improve on their predecessors ... Here [Tacitus] affects to decline such *aemulatio*."

The adjacency of Tacitus' excursus on historiography and Cordus' speech is a challenge to readers: they are challenged to consider which historian, Cordus or Tacitus, and which of their historiographical approaches ultimately contributes more to the good functioning of the state. Tacitus claims that his work provides use by informing its readers, whereas Cordus' reputation rests entirely upon his partisan opposition to the Caesars. By inserting himself among the pantheon of anti-Caesarians at the end of his speech, Cordus attempts to cement his legacy and obtain glory not only as a historian, but also a historical figure, defiant and worthy to be an object of history himself someday—and yet his trial is merely one of several in Book 4 that pushes both Tiberius to ever greater paranoia and the senate to ever increasing sycophancy.

Vc. The Survivors' Legacy

Following Cordus' speech the narrative hurries to a swift conclusion. Not awaiting a verdict, Cordus departs from the senate and commits suicide.¹⁰² Like the account of Seneca's death, that of Cordus' death also discusses the impact his suicide leaves on those who live on afterwards. We saw in the account of Seneca's death that Tacitus' final verdict on the usefulness of his suicide to the state was expressed in the *agon* between him and his wife, who, though having failed to commit suicide herself, in fact appeared favorable in comparison. She survived as an exemplary student of Seneca's Stoic teaching (excepting, perhaps, the aspects that teach the virtues of suicide) and, more importantly for Tacitus, showed, like Agricola, that reasonable interactions with even a *malus princeps* were possible without sycophancy. Again, Tacitus

¹⁰² The process of dying for Cordus is much prolonged in Seneca's account. Even in Tacitus' account, however, the swiftness of his death does not match up with the manner of his death: starvation, of course, takes some time to kill a person.

prefers the useful living rather than the useless dead. In the death of Cordus, too, the actions of the people who survive him colors the way we as readers are to interpret Cordus' death: what effects does his death have on those who continue living, and—the all-important question for Tacitus—did the suicide ultimately impact the state in a useful way?

Tacitus condenses a great portion of the afterlife of Cordus' works into one sentence, and the paucity of Tacitus' account, as well as its glaring omissions, are worth considering first. The description of the reaction to Cordus' death is extremely truncated: the senate decreed that his annals must be burned (*libros per aediles cremandos censuere patres*, A. 4.34.4), but hidden copies of it survived the reign of Tiberius and were eventually republished (*et manserunt occultati et editi*, *ibid.*). Dio Cassius and Seneca both name Marcia, Cordus' daughter, as the person most responsible for the preservation of Cordus' work during the reign of Tiberius.¹⁰³ As for the work's eventual public reemergence, we have already discussed that Gaius had permitted its republication at the beginning of his reign.¹⁰⁴ These historical facts, believed important by Seneca and Dio in their accounts, are succinctly covered by Tacitus in a four word stride: *manserunt occultati et editi*. The economical treatment of these details by Tacitus concentrates the narrative on the issues towards which he wishes to divert the reader's attention.¹⁰⁵

Neither the feel-good narrative of Cordus' daughter saving copies of the banned history nor the history's eventual redistribution are subjects that Tacitus wishes to discuss here. Tacitus' aversion to elaborating on these positive elements of Cordus' afterlife, as others sympathetic to

¹⁰³ Sen. *ad Marc.* 1, Dio 57.24.4.

¹⁰⁴ Suet. *Gai.* 16.1.1.

¹⁰⁵ Wisse (2013) 323-324 discusses the "focalization" of the Cordus narrative, how Tacitus is able to guide the conversation by deliberating truncating or omitting important historical details: "Tacitus' economy is clear, but becomes even more apparent from its omissions."

Cordus do, may indicate a desire to stifle such sympathies. In any event, Tacitus focuses with much greater emphasis on the senate's reaction to the speech and death of Cordus. And it must be emphasized that the narrative focuses exclusively on the senate's reaction—Tiberius and Sejanus are conspicuously absent both in the making of the senators' decree and in Tacitus' response to that decree, just as they are absent in Cordus' speech. The decision to burn Cordus' book appears to be initiated by the senators themselves, with no explicit instigation by Sejanus or Tiberius. It is Tacitus' goal to teach his readers about the nature of imperial power, and here the emperor hardly needs to exercise his existing power for more to be thrust upon him by sycophantic senators.

The senate's sycophancy is a frequent subject for discussion in Tacitus, especially in the *Annals*.¹⁰⁶ He best encapsulates his thoughts on this subject in Book 3, where he writes that by the reign of Tiberius the entire senatorial order had become contaminated with the perverse desire to debase itself for the sake of imperial favor:

ceterum tempora illa adeo infecta et adulatione sordida fuere, ut non modo primores ciuitatis, quibus claritudo sua obsequiis protegenda erat, sed omnes consulares, magna pars eorum, qui praetura functi, multique etiam peditarii senatores certatim exsugerent foedaque et nimia censerent.

Those times were so infected and dirtied by sycophancy that not only the leading men of the state, who had to protect their prominence with obsequious behavior, but all men of consular rank, a great part of those who had once been praetors, and even many low-ranking senators rose up in competition to make foul and excessive decrees.

(A. 3.65.2)

¹⁰⁶ For an overview of the sycophancy of the senate as a theme in the *Annals*, cf. Wisse (2013) 307-309. Tacitus also discusses this issue in his other works, especially *Agr.* 1-2.

A cyclical relationship developed between the senators and the emperor: as sycophancy encouraged the emperor to ever more excessive uses of power, this all the more incentivized obsequious behavior among senators—as senatorial sycophancy turned from unseemly to dangerous (*paulatim dehinc ab indecoris ad infesta transgrediebantur*, A. 3.66.1), matters were getting worse all the time. Given such a hostile environment, it was all the more impressive for Tacitus that there were men such as Marcus Lepidus, a prominent senator who died of natural causes during Tiberius' reign, who could give sensible guidance to the senate and still retain the steady favor of the emperor:

hunc ego Lepidum temporibus illis grauem et sapientem uirum fuisse comperior: nam pleraque ab saeuis adulationibus aliorum in melius flexit, neque tamen temperamenti egebat, cum aequabili auctoritate et gratia apud Tiberium uiguerit.

This Lepidus, I have learned, was an impressive and wise man in those times: for he diverted much away from the passionate sycophancy of others towards the better course, and, moreover, he was not lacking in restraint, since he flourished with unvarying authority and favor before Tiberius.

(A. 4.20.2)

Marcus Lepidus' example, as well as Agricola's, is for Tacitus the ideal in a senator's interaction with the emperor, and it is evident that Cordus fails to live up to this ideal. Rather than diverting the sycophantic instinct away from the senate, he led the senators directly to it by essentially forcing the senate's hand: it was clear that both Sejanus and Tiberius wished for Cordus and his works to be destroyed, and thus the senators, in order to retain the favor of the inner principate, were incited to obsequious action. Cordus' resolution to die an *ambitiosa mors* and thereby antagonize the emperor does not, of course, exonerate the senators' failure to resist succumbing to fear and sycophancy—Tacitus, in self-flagellating words, reproaches himself and the senate

for their collaboration in the death of dissenters during Domitian's reign¹⁰⁷—and yet Cordus' decision to commit suicide both as a disruptive form of protest and as a means of accruing glory and renown for himself is a far cry from the cooperative ideal established by Tacitus' portrayals of Agricola and Marcus Lepidus.

Tacitus' preoccupation with senatorial sycophancy explains the prominence of the senators' reaction to Cordus' suicide. Compared to other accounts of his death, the reaction of the senators receives the most attention in Tacitus' version.¹⁰⁸ It is in response to the senatorial decree that Cordus' books be burned that Tacitus launches into one of the best-known passages in the *Annals* (I have reprinted this passage below for the sake of convenience):

quo magis socordiam eorum inridere libet, qui praesenti potentia credunt extingui posse etiam sequentis aevi memoriam. nam contra punitis ingeniis gliscit auctoritas, neque aliud externi reges, aut qui eadem saeuitia usi sunt, nisi dedecus sibi atque illis gloriam peperere.

All the more pleasing is it to mock the stupidity of those who believe that with present power even the following age's memory can be extinguished. On the contrary, the authority of punished geniuses grows, and foreign kings or those who practice like savagery prepare nothing but dishonor for themselves and glory for them.

(A. 4.35.5)

Socordia indicates either a bodily or mental weakness; it is often used in the former sense by Sallust,¹⁰⁹ but Tacitus is clearly employing the latter sense here. The *prima facie* reading of this passage is to include the emperors into the group of those who think, out of their stupidity, that

¹⁰⁷ *Agr. 2.3: dedimus profecto grande patientiae documentum; et, sicut uetus aetas uidit quid ultimum in libertate esset, ita nos quid in seruitute, adempto per inquisitiones etiam loquendi audiendique commercio.* Cf. Woodman (2014): "Citizens did not have the courage to offer resistance: they were so cowed into servile submission that even the normal exchanges of speaking and listening were abandoned."

¹⁰⁸ Seneca's version of Cordus' trial and death contains no mention of senatorial agency, nor does Dio Cassius' version, though his account does corroborate Tacitus' claim that copies of Cordus' books were destroyed by the aediles (57.24.4).

¹⁰⁹ Martin and Woodman (1989) 167; e.g. *Sall. C. 4.1.4, J. 2.4.5.*

the past's memory can be altered with present power. However, in light of the context of this passage—that Tacitus identifies the senators as the most direct cause of the burning of Cordus' histories—and given the total absence of Tiberius and Sejanus in the discussion of Cordus' afterlife, it is the senators whose *socordia* it is “all the more pleasing to mock,” not Tiberius or Sejanus.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the use of *socordia* almost certainly alludes to another use of this word a mere five chapters prior to its appearance here.¹¹⁰ In A. 4.31 Tacitus recounts the trial of C. Cominius, a Roman knight, which very nearly results in an indictment on account of a “a poem rebuking [Tiberius]” (*probrosi in se carminis*, A. 4.31.1) by that knight. Cominius' trial foreshadows the more important, upcoming trial in which Cremutius Cordus will be charged for *maiestas* on account of his histories. But unlike Cordus, Cominius is spared by Tiberius' merciful concession to the pleas of Cominius' unnamed brother. Surprised by the favorable outcome, Tacitus takes a brief aside to muse about Tiberius' character:

quo magis mirum habebatur gnarum meliorum, et quae fama clementiam sequeretur, tristiora malle. neque enim socordia peccabat ...

It was considered all the more amazing that though [Tiberius] understood better options, as well as what reputation follows clemency, he preferred the grimmer. For he did not err out of **stupidity**...

(A. 4.31.2)

Tacitus believes that Tiberius was not one to make mistakes out of *socordia*, and so when he writes that it was out of *socordia* that Cordus' works were ordered to be destroyed, it would be

¹¹⁰ *Socordia* is a fairly uncommon word in the *Annals*, occurring only five times total throughout the whole work. Its appearance in both A. 4.31 and 4.35 is the only example in the *Annals* of this word appearing in the same book.

quite sensible not to place the fault on Tiberius for the destruction of Cordus' works, or at least to minimize Tiberius' agency in that decision.¹¹¹

Tacitus isolates Tiberius from the decision to destroy Cordus' histories in order to show that the unintended "victims" of Cordus' speech are the senators. Cordus attempted to force Tiberius into using his extraordinary power to have the subversive works destroyed, but he failed when the senators took it upon themselves to have the works destroyed by their decree. Just as there was a general breakdown of competency and rectitude that led to Seneca's death, "the inevitable failure of everyone involved" (*fatali omnium ignavia*, A. 15.61.3), all are culpable in the general deterioration of the state that resulted from the trial of Cordus—Sejanus for establishing the charge, Tiberius for approving the charge, Cordus for failing to address the underlying issues at hand, and the senators for acting the sycophants' part. In the end Cordus' plan backfired: his intent to bait Tiberius resulted in giving over to greater sycophancy, and thereby further weakening, the very group his Republican sentiments would have him support.

¹¹¹ Moles (1998) 155-156 advocates a needlessly complicated interpretation of *socordia* in the two passages, that Tacitus is "punning on different sense [sic] of *socordia* or ... 'redefining' *socordia* in 35.5." Essentially Moles argues that Tiberius both makes errors out of *socordia* and does not make errors out of *socordia*, a sophistic game I do not believe that Tacitus is playing.

VI. Conclusion

When the senators decreed the destruction of Cordus' histories, they paradoxically assured its survival, just as Cordus himself predicted (A. 4.34.5, 35.3). His authority grew *because* his works were perceived to have been harshly treated and ultimately the senators who attempted to destroy them bestowed upon him glory while they themselves suffered dishonor (A. 4.35.5). Many scholars, thinking that Cordus and Tacitus share similar beliefs about politics and the writing of history, and assuming, perhaps understandably, that the language of glory and honor confers automatic praise, have interpreted the ending of the Cremutius Cordus narrative as an approval of Cordus' fearless defense of the historian's rights.

But Tacitus believed that the shift from Republic to Empire brought along a concomitant shift in the worth of certain virtues. For Tacitus, neither honor among the people nor glory from posterity are reliable metrics for the historian's, or any author's, merit. I have argued that Cordus, for all the glory his enemies inadvertently heaped upon him, falls short of Tacitus' standards of didactic, and hence good, historiography. To illustrate better Tacitus' thoughts about Cordus, I drew a comparison from his analogous treatment of the Stoics, particularly Seneca: though the Stoics are often called by Tacitus *ingenia* (a rather neutral term by itself) and are even thought worthy of glory, still their obstinate resistance to the state and their self-destruction ultimately resulted in *ambitiosa mors*, ostentatious deaths that did little or nothing to contribute to the betterment of the state.

I have argued that there are marked differences between the thinking of Cordus and Tacitus, differences that form around the concept of utility. This utility, a concept in Tacitean literature requiring much more refinement in future projects, has been defined throughout this project as Tacitus' desire to inform readers about the forces, whether apparent or underlying, that

sustain the emperor's power. I have argued that to fail at informing readers about these forces is, in Tacitus' eyes, to fail at being an historian. Tacitus' preference for utility rather than glory is most evident in the manner in which he refers to his own annals. Tacitus' ostensibly humble admission that his "inglorious labor" falls short of the excitement of the older Roman historians is in fact a boast that his work performs an important function for those living under an emperor, whereas Cordus weakened the state by dividing it further with inflammatory writing.

Cordus himself says in his speech that "posterity reevaluates each person's worth" (*suum cuique decus posteritas rependit*). Through this project I hope that I have contributed in some way to reevaluating the current consensus in scholarly opinion about Tacitus' thoughts on Cordus. Unqualified praise for any person is exceedingly rare for Tacitus, and Cremutius Cordus is no exception.

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