In *Agricola*, Tacitus narrates a laudatory biography of his father-in-law’s life and service to the Roman state. He describes Agricola’s early life and political and military career, cumulating in his governorship and conquest of Britain, which he achieved through military victories and by bringing Roman civilization to the natives. Following his recall by the malicious and jealous emperor Domitian, as Tacitus characterizes him, Agricola dies young, at the age of 53 in A.D. 93. In the opening to his work, Tacitus clearly states the theme of his biography as the preservation of “excellence,” “virtue,” or *virtus*.¹ He uses the word four times in the introduction alone, and the word occurs a total of 27 times in the entire work. However, despite the frequency of the word’s use, the precise definition of *virtus* remains unclear. While the word often indicates traditional values, Tacitus frequently uses *virtus* to connote non-

¹ Throughout this paper, I have chosen to translate the Latin word *virtus* as “virtue.” In English, the word virtue can take on many different meanings. Since the Latin word has multiple meanings, and it is often futile to try to pin down Tacitus’s use of *virtus* to one definition, as I will demonstrate, I have used “virtue” to avoiding implying that *virtus* has only one, clear definition in my translations.
traditional principles of behavior. Further, the word sometimes takes on not just a single meaning, but several at once. In Agricola, virtus indicates several different and sometimes contradictory meanings, according to the context it is used in. While there is no one way to define the word, the ambiguity of its meaning echoes the confused state of virtus that Tacitus perceived in his time. Yet, despite the difficulty of comprehending Tacitus’s use of virtus, the word remains a key to understanding Agricola’s character and the work as a whole. In this paper, I will explore the understanding of the word virtus in scholarship and apply these understandings to Tacitus’s specific use of the word in Agricola. I will demonstrate how Tacitus’s use of the word presents the reader with several different, contradictory definitions, and explore the implications of this confused understanding of virtus for the work as a whole.

I. Virtus in Scholarship

While the Oxford Latin Dictionary gives insight into how classical authors generally used virtus, it does not always help the reader to understand the specific connotations of the word in a particular context. The Oxford Latin Dictionary gives three definitions of virtus

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that are relevant to the word’s use in Agricola. The first definition entry defines virtus as “the qualities typical of a true man, manly spirit, resolution, valor, steadfastness, or similar” and these qualities “especially as displayed in war and other contests” (OLD 1, 1b). This entry aligns with the traditional meaning of virtus, as other scholars define the word in its Republican sense and usage.\(^2\) For example, Donald Earl explains that “virtus, for the Republican noble, consisted in the winning of personal preeminence and glory by the commission of great deeds in the service of the Roman state.”\(^3\) Likewise, Myles McDonnell stresses that “physical prowess or courage, especially as displayed in war, remained that central element of manliness \([\text{virtus}]\) throughout the Republican period and into the Empire. This both corresponds to the highly militaristic nature of Roman Republican society and is supported by usage.”\(^4\) A recent

\(^2\) A good example of virtus used in this Republican sense in another author is in Caesar’s Gallic War: “A part of the military men, after the enemy had withdrawn because of their virtue, arrived in camp unharmed” (Militum pars horum virtute summotis hostibus praeter spem incolumis in castra pervenit, 6.40.8). For other examples of virtus used in this sense, see Caesar, Gallic War 2.27.2; Sallust, The Catilinarian Conspiracy 20.9; and Cicero, Against Verres 5.1.


Roman history textbook, *A History of the Roman People*, also emphasizes that “the need for every able-bodied armed man to fight in the army produced a warrior ethos that made military valor particularly salient in the Roman concept of virtue.”⁵ Based on these four definitions, traditional, Republican *virtus* consisted of great deeds done for the state, especially in war. Notably, this definition concretely enumerates the specific qualities that *virtus* encompasses. Other entries define *virtus* as “excellence of character or mind, worth, merit, ability, etc.” *(OLD 2)* and “moral excellence, virtue, goodness” *(OLD 3)*. These entries do not define the specific qualities that the word encompasses. They instead use the abstract word “excellence” to avoid a more specific definition of the word, which would explain the precise ways in which a man can be excellent, as the Republican definition does. Thus, when *virtus* is not used in its traditional sense, denoting Republican values, it becomes difficult to define the specific values or qualities that it encompasses.

Accordingly, because of the difficulty in enumerating the specific qualities inherent in *virtus*, many

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modern authors have presented varied definitions of the word in Tacitus. Ronald Syme writes that “‘Virtus’, though watered down by some moralists, retained for the Romans its primary meaning of courage and energy,”\(^6\) presenting a meaning of the word basically synonymous with its Republican meaning. However, Ronald Martin states that Tacitus uses the word with more diversity in meaning. He writes that “though many of the societal values that the Republic had cultivated had necessarily been modified or downgraded under the Principate, the idea of public service publically recognized, which is inherent in the concept of virtus, persisted,”\(^7\) accounting for different meanings that the word had taken on, while still stressing the concept of public service done for the state. Finally, A.R. Birley directly acknowledges the many different meanings that virtus takes on throughout the work, pointing out that the word sometimes takes on a military sense, and sometimes describes character traits:

Various virtutes are specified throughout the work.

Near its end, referring to the time, some five years

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after Agricola had retired, when there was a series of military disasters, Tacitus writes that ‘everyone was comparing his energy, steadfastness and spirit schooled in warfare with the inaction and timidity of others’ (41.2). Then very different qualities are emphasized: ‘moderation,’ moderatio, and ‘good sense,’ prudentia, and, in the ‘outburst’ already quoted, obsequium and modestia are praised—provided that they are combined with industria and vigor (42.4).^8

Instead of attempting to lump the many meanings of virtus under one definition and forcing this reading onto all uses of the word, Birley notes that different definitions occur in different contexts. Moreover, while he does not explicitly state the separation, he has drawn an important distinction between the different uses of virtus: its use in a military sense, and its use in other senses.

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II. The Usage of Virtus in Agricola

This division of the word’s function provides a helpful framework for looking at how virtus takes on different meanings depending on its specific, contextual usage. Dividing the uses of virtus into instances where Tacitus employs the word in a primarily military sense and a primarily non-military sense broadly accounts for all of the different meanings that the word can take on. The word has a primarily military definition in 11.5, 15.5, 17.3, 23.1, 27.1, 27.3, 29.4, 31.4, 32.1, 33.2, 33.4, 37.3, and 39.3. All of these uses of the word occur in the middle sections of the work, either during or in reference to Agricola’s governorship of Britain. In these instances, virtus takes on the traditional, Republican meaning of the word, since in this context virtus refers to military exploits and skill, ideally executed and accomplished for the state. For example, when Tacitus writes about the Britons, he reports that “the Gauls were prosperous in war; soon sloth entered with peace, when military excellence [virtus] was lost equally with liberty” (Nam Gallos quoque in bellis floruis; mox segnitia cum otio intravit, amissa virtute pariter ac libertate, 11.5). Also, when discussing the conquest of Britain, Tacitus writes that “Julius Frontinus… subjugated the strong and warlike race of the Silures with arms, when
he overcame the military excellence \textit{[virtus]} of the enemies, and the difficulties of the land” \textit{(Iulius Frontinus... validamque et pugnacem Silurum gentem armis subegit, super virtutem hostium locorum quoque difficultates eluctatus, 17.3)}. In these cases, the word \textit{virtus} clearly means something close to “military excellence”; the sentence does not make sense with another meaning of the word. However, the word has a primarily non-military meaning in the rest of its uses in the work, specifically at 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 4.1, 8.2, 8.3, 9.4, 9.5, 40.4, 41.1, 44.3, and 46.1, when it is not used in the context of Britain. In these sections, \textit{virtus} does not primarily refer to Republican values, but it rather takes on new, non-traditional meanings.

The opening sentence of \textit{Agricola} illustrates the complex nature of the word \textit{virtus} in this work. Tacitus writes that even in his present age, writers compose histories “as often as some great and noble virtue has conquered and has overcome a fault common to small and great states, ignorance of what is right and envy” \textit{(…quotiens magna aliqua ac nobilis virtus vicit ac supergressa est vitium parvis magnisque civitatibus commune, ignorantiam recti et invidiam, 1.1)}. Here, Tacitus suggests that virtue is something that can overcome various faults, specifically ignorance of right and envy.
However, Tacitus does not clarify exactly which qualities *virtus* encompasses or how he defines the word. In this instance the word could take on a whole host of meanings; the author does not specify any particular qualities that can conquer these vague faults. Likewise, the other uses of the *virtus* in the introductory paragraph contain ambiguous definitions of the word (1.2, 1.3, 1.4). While the context of the word in later passages does help to define it more specifically, Tacitus’s vague use of *virtus* in the first sentence of the work fittingly characterizes his employment of the word throughout *Agricola*, presenting the reader with many, sometimes contradictory, uses of the word.

To begin with, Tacitus uses *virtus* in a more easily definable manner in chapter eight, employing the word in a primarily non-military sense, although it still has undertones of its Republican definition. While describing Agricola’s talents in war, he writes that Agricola “by his virtue in following, by his modesty in proclaiming, was beyond hatred, but not beyond glory” (*Ita virtute in obsequendo, verecundia in praedicando extra invidiam nec extra gloriam erat*, 8.3). Although this section occurs in the context of discussing Agricola’s military talents, Agricola’s qualities are not associated with the traditional military skills of Republican virtue. Rather, Tacitus states that
Agricola achieved glory through obedience and modesty. However, since this passage does occur in the context of military life, the word *virtus* still reminds the reader of its traditional connotations, especially because the reader knows that Agricola also possessed great military skill. Likewise, when Tacitus says in the same section that in Britain, under the leadership of Petilius Cerialis, Agricola’s “virtues had a space of display” (*habuerunt virtutes spatium exemplorum*, 8.2), it is unclear exactly what virtues Tacitus refers to. He could be referencing Agricola’s military ability or his talents in appropriately obeying authority and confining himself to modesty. Thus, Tacitus suggests two definitions of *virtus* here, primarily redefining the word as obedience and modesty, while it still has undertones of its traditional meaning.

Likewise, Tacitus uses the word *virtus* in a similar way later in the work, when discussing Agricola’s behavior after Domitian recalled him from Britain. Following his recall, “to dilute his [Agricola’s] military name, unpopular among civilians, with other virtues, he drank leisure deeply, he was modest in his dress, he was easy in his speech, he was joined by one or two of his friends…(*Ceterum uti

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9 Agricola’s skill in war is the subject of sections 18-28. Any reader of the work would realize that Agricola was a competent military leader.
Tacitus clearly presents multiple definitions for the word *virtus*. Yet, he includes military success as one of Agricola’s virtues. Tacitus’s use of the word “other” (*alius*) indicates that he considers military skill to be only one of the many virtues that Agricola possesses. Tacitus also lists modesty and adherence to the norm, by avoiding activities that might be hostile to the emperor, as virtues that Agricola has. Once again, Tacitus presents a complex definition of *virtus*, giving the word several different meanings.

Similarly, Tacitus presents a complicated definition of *virtus* in relation to Agricola’s character in section nine. However, in this passage, Tacitus presents the primary meaning of *virtus* as one that *contradicts* the Republican ideal, rather than one that has undertones of it. Tacitus discusses Agricola’s character in office, writing that “to mention integrity and moderation in such a man would be an insult of his virtues. He did not even seek fame, which often even good men give way to, by displaying virtue or through skill” (*Integritatem atque abstinentiam in tanto viro referre iniuria virtutum fuerit. Ne famam quidem, cui*
saepe etiam boni indulgent, ostentanda virtute aut per artem quaesivit, 9.4-5). Tacitus here implies that integrity and moderation are inherent in virtus; therefore, such a great man obviously possesses these qualities. Additionally, Tacitus implies that virtus does not need to be publicly displayed, but rather that openly boasting about one’s virtues diminishes their excellence. However, in its traditional sense of great deeds done for the state, virtus required public recognition. Thus, Tacitus here seems to present a definition of virtus that contradicts and condemns its Republican ideal, rather than having undertones of this traditional meaning.

Tacitus also makes an important statement about how men are able to be “great” (magnos, 42.5), which helps to present an alternate definition of virtus. Although Tacitus does not use the word virtus in this section, he clearly presents his opinions on how men are able to achieve excellence, regardless of the political situation. Magnus in this sense means, “great in attainment or achievement, distinguished, skilled” (OLD 13), and thus implies excellence, as virtus does. He writes, “Those whose habit it is to admire what is forbidden ought to know that

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there can be great men even under bad emperors, and that
duty and discretion, if coupled with energy and a career of
action, will bring a man to no less glorious summits than
are attained by perilous paths and ostentatious deaths that
do not benefit the Commonwealth” (trans. A.R. Birley)

(Sciant, quibus moris est inlicita mirari, posse etiam sub
malis principibus magnos viros esse, obsequiumque ac
modestiam, si industria ac vigor adsint, eo laudis excedere,
quo plerique per abrupta, sed in nullum rei publicae usum
ambitiosae morte inclaruerunt, 42.5). Here, Tacitus presents
a clear definition of what does and does not make a man
great. He states that obedience and modesty, joined with
industry, make a man magnus, but an ambitious death is
useless, since it does no good to the state. Given that during
the Republic, a man achieved virtus through public service
to the Roman state,11 Tacitus seems to make a striking
statement about the nature of virtus here. He states that
obedience and modesty, combined with activeness,
constitute virtus, by achieving the most good for the state.
However, dramatic deaths, which theoretically imitate
Republican values, are not virtuous at all, since they
ultimately do not help the state. As Tacitus asserts, many
were accustomed to judge greatness by appearance and

ambition (40.4), and so would estimate virtue only through dramatic public efforts that aligned directly with the Republican ideal of virtus. Yet death helps no one; these men who seemed virtuous in their dramatic, public actions had actually accomplished nothing. Thus, with this statement,Tacitus seems to redefine virtus in a way that contradicts the Republican definition, explaining service to the state as obedience and modesty, rather than an ostentatious recognition of deeds performed to enhance a person’s reputation.

Finally, Tacitus presents a similarly condemning view of traditional virtus when describing Agricola’s father. He writes that “his father was Julius Graecinus, of the senatorial class, known for his study of eloquence and philosophy, and with these virtues themselves he earned the anger of Gaius Caesar: for he ordered that he accuse Marcus Silanus and, because he refused, he was killed” (Pater illi Iulius Graecinus senatorii ordinis, studio eloquentiae sapientiaeque notus, iisque ipsis virtutibus iram Gai Caesaris meritus: namque Marcum Silanum accusare iussus et, quia abnuerat, interfectus est, 4.1). In this section, Tacitus equates virtus with a “study of eloquence and philosophy,” but these virtues, which cause Agricola’s father to deny the request of an emperor,
eventually get him killed. As Tacitus states in 42.5, he considers such deaths to be unnecessary and of no use to the state. Rather, under a bad emperor, moderation and obedience are more advisable forms of *virtus*. It seems that Tacitus has rather enumerated “anti-virtues” here with his use of the word, as engaging in lawless activities that lead to death. Thus, while Tacitus uses this instance to propagate an understanding of *virtus* that contradicts the Republican ideal, the meaning of the word itself here refers to something that Tacitus in fact does not find virtuous, further complicating the ways in which he uses the word.

**III. The Many Meanings of *Virtus***

Given the many and sometimes contradictory ways that Tacitus employs the word *virtus* in the work, it is difficult to understand how the word functions in *Agricola*. On the one hand, when discussing Agricola’s governorship in Britain, Tacitus’s use of *virtus* aligns with the traditional, Republican definition of the word, without such complex or contradictory undertones. In these cases, no other definition needs to be understood in conjunction with the traditional meaning for the word to make sense in the context of the sentence. But on the other hand, the ways in which Tacitus uses the word *virtus* are more complex and even
contradictory in some places; some of its usages suggest the traditional definition of the word as one of its meanings, while some usages of the word contradict this traditional definition. While a basic definition of *virtus*, used in its non-military sense could equate to something like “moderation, obedience,” it is impossible to come up with a meaning of the word that applies to all of its non-military uses. This difficulty in defining *virtus* reflects the complexity of Tacitus’s writing and of what exactly defines *virtus* when living under a bad emperor, such as Domitian. While military exploits still remained an important service to the state, the difficulties of living under a bad emperor had also made this type of *virtus* problematic. For example, Domitian maintains that “virtue of the good leader was for the emperor” (*ducis boni imperatoriam virtutem esse*, 39.3), and thus feels threatened by Agricola’s success in Britain. Tacitus seems to say that sometimes moderation is ultimately of more help to the state, since it does not result in a useless death. Thus, this confused definition of *virtus* seems to reflect an awareness that societal values must change with historical circumstance, although traditional values continue to resonate and hold importance.

Moreover, Tacitus reflects this reality, that traditional *virtus* is problematic under a bad emperor,
through his depiction of *virtus* in Britain. Katherine Clarke shows that Tacitus presents Britain as a haven of traditional Roman *virtus*, and as an appropriate place for Agricola to display his military talents, away from Rome itself, where traditional *virtus* can no longer exist.12 This conception of Britain aligns with Tacitus’s use of the word *virtus*. It takes on its traditional, Republican definition in relation to Agricola’s governorship of Britain. The word used only with its traditional, Republican sense cannot occur in Rome, where the meaning of *virtus* has changed so much, and has no clear meaning. Rather, Agricola can only achieve traditional Roman *virtus* in a place that is not hostile to its existence, as Domitianic Rome is. Nevertheless, some of the uses of *virtus* outside of Britain still carry this Republican meaning as one of their definitions. Therefore, although Tacitus draws a distinction between the meaning of *virtus* inside and outside of Rome, he still allows for the possibility of traditional *virtus* to exist in Rome. One can still possess traditional *virtus* in the city, although it must be tempered with some other qualities of *virtus*, like moderation (40.4). At the same time, however, Tacitus suggests that this traditional military excellence,

which Agricola displayed in Britain, may have eventually led to his death. Domitian fears him because of his military exploits (39.3), and Tacitus implies that he plots Agricola’s death because of these successes (43); ultimately, traditional virtus leads to Agricola’s end. Thus, Tacitus seems to say that while traditional virtus can still exist in Rome under a bad emperor, it is unwise to obtain this type of virtus. Traditional virtus ultimately contradicts the new qualities of virtus which allow great men to survive, even under bad emperors, by demanding public recognition for deeds done for the state. Domitian believes that this honor belongs only to the emperor, and public recognition for his deeds, although unwanted by Agricola (39-42), ultimately causes his death. Thus, Tacitus seems to suggest that, while the concept of traditional virtus can exist in places outside of Rome, and even in Rome itself, it is inadvisable for a man to possess traditional virtus under a bad emperor.

In light of the many, contradictory meanings that virtus can take on, how can a reader understand the word in contexts which give no real clue to the specific qualities of virtus which Tacitus is referring to? For example, in the opening, Tacitus writes that “virtues are thus judged best in their own time, in which they are born most easily” (adeo virtutes isdem temporibus optime aestimantur, quibus
facillime gignuntur, 1.3) and that “the times are so savage and hostile to virtues” (tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora, 1.4). In these instances, the context does not allow the reader to infer which specific qualities virtus refers to. Thus, it is important to keep in mind the many different ways that Tacitus uses the word in the entire work. In these cases, the word virtus can reference the whole spectrum of meaning that the word takes on in Agricola, depending on how the reader interprets its usage. Likewise, in the conclusion to the work, Tacitus asks, “may you [Agricola] call us and your house from weak desire and womanly laments to the contemplation of your virtues, which it is not right to mourn or lament” (...nosque domum tuam ab infirmo desiderio et muliebribus lamentis ad contemplationem virtutum tuarum voces, quas neque lugeri neque plangi fas est, 46.1). In this instance again, it is unclear exactly which virtues of Agricola the word is referring to, since he possesses both traditional virtus and non-traditional virtus, and this non-traditional virtus takes on many meanings throughout the work. In these instances, there is no reason to impose one definition of the word onto virtus. Rather, the text takes on more meaning, and better reflects the complexities of Tacitus’s writing, when the
reader keeps the many different definitions of the word in mind.

Finally, in this exhortation, Tacitus bridges the gap between the historical biography that he has composed and the reader. The first person plural verb form refers to all subsequent readers ensuring that “through reading the *Agricola*, the living continuation of the dead man’s virtues, that Agricola’s family, and subsequent readers who did not know him personally, will contemplate and show the proper response to his greatness.”\(^{13}\) The importance of this work, the values that it demonstrates, and the contemplation that it inspires, remain relevant even today. Continued reflection on Tacitus’s work ensures not only that “Agricola, narrated and handed down to posterity will survive” (*Agricola posteritati narratus et traditus superstes erit*, 46.4), but also that every individual reader will enrich his own life with an understanding of the work.

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