Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote in a letter to Cn. Pompeius, “one might say the most necessary task for writers of any kind of history is to select a noble subject which will please their readers.” Concern for a “noble subject” is indicative of the laudatory nature of ancient historiography. For, if one selects a subject to write about which he deems worthy, it is difficult not to engage in praise. Such a “noble subject” is evident in the first work of Tacitus, the *Agricola*. However, it would seem that his later works, especially his *Annales*, deal with the opposite. The *Annales* cover a subject that is anything but noble. It seems that Tacitus chooses to disrupt the expectations of his readers by focusing mostly on a generally unflattering portrayal of the machinations of the Julio-Claudian emperors, rather than depicting great battles and heroes. Yet, it also appears that Tacitus’ concern with a “noble subject” and the praise of this subject are still present in the *Annales*, and that Tacitus believes this to be an important aspect of writing history. The trial of Cremutius Cordus in *Annales* 4.34-4.35 serves as a primary example.

Cordus’ trial occupies a unique position in classical historiography, as it contains the only recorded speech of a

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Roman historian.\textsuperscript{18} It is riveting defense of an already condemned man, and while many scholars, such as Moles,\textsuperscript{19} note the presence of the theme of liberty, a concern with praise also appears to be present. The speech, as with many other speeches in historiography, is likely the result of \textit{inventio}. Syme asserts that the speech is the creation of Tacitus.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore, given the content of the speech, it seems likely that Tacitus may have used the speech to put forth his own views of historiography. I will argue how the speech of Cordus indicates that Tacitus viewed praise as essential in writing history, and that this is a belief which he retained from the \textit{Agricola}. I will begin with a brief overview of Tacitus’ justification for writing encomium in the beginning of the \textit{Agricola} and the historical context of why praise was received with increasing hostility in Rome. From there, I will examine the argument of the speech itself, and consider how diction within it seems to create a distance between Cordus and the charges themselves; rather than Cordus being on trial alone, it appears that the idea of praise itself is also on trial. Finally, I will consider how words of praise that permeate throughout the speech, especially in relation to Livy, provide Tacitus the context to engage in praise, and how this is suggestive of his views of praise.

\textsuperscript{19} Moles (1998) 169-175.
\textsuperscript{20} Syme (1958) 337 n10.
Section I: A Time Savage to Praise

Tacitus begins his first work with a preface that decries how praise in writing history has become increasingly difficult under the principate. He writes: “But now about to narrate the life of a dead man I needed to seek pardon, which I would not seek about to criticize: so savage and hostile are the times towards excellence” (at nunc narraturo mihi vitam defuncti venia opus fuit quam non petissem incusaturus: tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora, Agr. 1.4). The use of *venia* is indicative of animosity towards praise. Here it means pardon,21 which suggests that Tacitus had done a wrong that requires that he seek forgiveness. If writing a work of praise requires forgiveness, this suggests that praise is a crime. Sailor notes that there is much scholarly debate surrounding from whom Tacitus needed to seek pardon (Domitian or his readership), and, as a result, there is much controversy if Tacitus is referring to the reign of Domitian or Trajan. Sailor asserts that the text seems to “refuses to endorse either one.”22 Indeed, the deliberate ambiguity of the tenses would lend credence to both being possible. The form of *sum* could refer to either the past in relation to Tacitus or his readership, and the final phrase lacks a verb. Either *sunt* or *erant* are possible. This choice is deliberate, and, thus, suggests that if both possibilities exist, both readings are possible. Therefore, Tacitus indicates that the principate—

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21 OLD *venia* 4a.
both the regime and his audience—have become hostile towards praise.

The rise of such hostility is, itself, the result of the rise of the principate. With the Republic descending into civil war because of the ability of a single general to garner a large amount of public loyalty and support from their army, many of the institutions of the principate were designed to ensure that power and glory were exclusive to the princeps. Legates, for instance, assigned all their military victories to the emperor. 23 Thus, it proves dangerous for an individual to rise above the renown of the emperor, is seen in Domitian’s concern with the rising popularity of Agricola (Agr. 39). Therefore, it proves impossible for one to write about a noble subject other than the emperor. This hostility on the part of the regime might have also possibly caused a hostility amongst those reading history. Sailor suggests that the regime had a rather important role in determining the popularity of books, and indifference from the emperor could be disastrous for an author. 24 Therefore, it is possible that the opinion of the regime would sway readership, and if that opinion was hostile towards waxing panegyric, then so would be Tacitus’ audience.

**Section II: The Defense of Praise**

Despite optimism of a culture more conducive to *ingenium* during the reigns of Nerva and Trajan, it is evident

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23 Goldsworthy (2016) 323.
from the content and the diction in the speech of Cremutius Cordus that, by the time he wrote the *Annales*, Tacitus still seemed to be grappling with a hostility towards praise in Roman society. The defense speech, then, serves as Tacitus’ own defense of praise. While Cordus is specifically charged with praise of Brutus and calling Cassius the last of the Romans, Tacitus’ word choice and Cordus’ focus on historical precedent seem to create distance between Cordus’ own lauding and that of praise in general. Thus, the speech appears to serve as a metaphorical defense of the act of praise in a time increasingly hostile towards it.

For instance, Tacitus portrays Cordus’ very first words as “My words, conscript fathers, are charged” (*verba mea, patres conscripti, arguuntur*, *Ann.* 4.34.2). Tacitus’ decision to have Cordus state that his words (*verba*) are accused as opposed to himself separates Cordus from accusation. Thus, it seems that the very act of praise itself is on trial, not just Cordus. He then states: “But these [words] were not against the emperor or the parent of the emperor, whom the law of majesty embraces” (*sed neque haec in principem aut principis quos lex maiestatis amplecitur, Ann.* 4.34.2). Again, Tacitus distances Cordus from the charge when he states that his words (*haec*) do not apply to the *lex maiestatis* (law of majesty). Furthermore, the use of the relative pronoun here restricts the scope of the law. The gender and number means that the form of *quos* agrees with *princeps* and *parens*, and directly suggests that the *lex maiestatis*
specifically refers to Tiberius and Augustus. Moreover, the verb *amplector* most literally means “to take or hold lovingly.”

Thus, the imagery suggests the *lex maiestatis* embraces and loves the emperor. Not only is this suggestive of the relationship between the regime and the use of the *lex maiestatis*, but it also limits the effects of the law to acts that belittle the majesty of the emperor. As Cordus argues, the law does not apply to him in this case, because, therefore, the *lex maiestatis* only encompasses criticism, not praise. The focus of his defense, then, vindicates the act of praise as a whole, not just Cordus’ use. Such a reading seems plausible given the use of ambiguous words that further distance Cordus from the charges.

This may be observed in Cordus’ statement of what he is accused of: “I am said to have praised Brutus and Cassius, of whose deeds, while composed by many, no one has remembered without honor” (*Brutum et Cassium laudauisse dicor, quorum res gestas cum plurimi composuerint, nemo sine honore memorauit, Ann. 4.34.2*). The passive of *dico* creates a sense of ambiguity around the charge. Its use suggests that it is unclear whether Cordus actually praised Brutus and Cassius; thus, when Cordus goes on to defend their legacy, it seems that he is defending the very act of praising Brutus and Cassius rather than his own specific praise for the two liberators.

Moreover, the

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25 OLD *amplector* 1a.

26 Cordus’ description of the exploits of Brutus’ and Cassius’ exploits as *res gestas* is also suggestive of a laudatory nature. *Gero* with *res* commonly refers to a list of accomplishments (OLD *gero* 9b)
adjective *plurimus* and the noun *nemo* similarly seem to display vagueness; rather than mentioning specific authors, the non-descript adjectives serve to indicate that the act of praise in history is ubiquitous. After all, if “no one” has written about Brutus and Cassius without honor, then everyone who wrote about them praised them. Thus, it would appear that Cordus does not defend his specific use of praise; rather, he seems to be defending the act itself. This indicates that the trial itself seems to be acting as a defense of the use of praise in historiography as a whole.

**Section III: Tacitus Crafts Encomium**

In addition to defending the use of praise in his own work, Tacitus has Cordus praise various other historians, especially Livy. Where his argument relays on precedent, Cordus would engage in praise of his predecessors. The language of the passage is rather “over the top,” and seems to serve as panegyric. Not only does Tacitus seem to use this opportunity to compliment his favorite historians, but, by engaging in praise, he seems to reaffirm his views of praise.

For instance, Tacitus has Cordus extoll Livy as “the foremost distinguished man of eloquence and credibility” (*eloquentiae ac fidei praeclarus in primus, Ann. 4.34.3*). The prefix of *praee-* on the adjective *praeculares* gives the adjective a higher degree and suggests “very distinguished,” and the use of the prepositional phrase here adds even further praise. Tacitus’ use of *praeculares* is also rather uncommon. Cicero used it 373
times, while it only appears in Tacitus on about eight occasions. (It only appears in the *Annales* three times). Furthermore, Martin and Woodman note Tacitus’ choice of the genitive here as “unparalleled,” which brings a sense of insurmountable praise to surround Livy. Thus, just as Tacitus’ use of both *praecelarusc* the use of the genitive in this context is rare, so as a historian with such quality as Livy. Tacitus’ rather extensive praise here not only suggests he held a high opinion of Livy, but indicates that praise was an important aspect of writing ancient history. After all, he is a historian furthering his argument and defending his encomiastic writings with praise. Cordus essentially argues that he is permitted to use praise in describing Brutus and Cassius because Livy, who is highly regarded, did something similar.

Tacitus elaborates further, and uses emphatic diction to pump up Livy’s praise of Pompey to further Cordus’ argument, but also to enhance the perception of Livy himself. Cordus says that “he lifted Pompey up with such great praise that Augustus called him a ‘Pompeian’” (*Cn. Pompeium tantis laudibus tulit ut “Pompeianum” eum Augustus appellerat*, 4.34.3). The use of the adjective *tantus* and the verb *fero* emphasizes the degree of praise Livy employed. Tacitus here (along with much of the speech) seems to participate in some *inventio* to further his

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27 This was found by using the Packard Humanities Institute Latin word search tool. http://latin.packhum.org/search
extensive praise. It seems unlikely that Augustus actually called Livy a “Pompeian.” Woodman asserts that, based on Livy’s early writings, he would have naturally supported Augustus. Rather, it seems prudent to infer that Tacitus created this small detail, or as Woodman and Martin suggest, Tacitus took a joke literally. However, the latter seems questionable, as it is not unreasonable to think that Tacitus was capable of understanding sarcasm and irony. Woodman asserts that ancient historiography was concerned with a core set of facts from which historians could elaborate so long as resultant account was plausible. Therefore, it appears Tacitus engages in *inventio* to strengthen Cordus’ argument, and further his praise of Livy. As noted previously, Cordus extolls Livy as distinguished in regard to “credibility” (*fidei*, 4.34.3). *Fides* here appears to mean credence or trust. Yet, as Woodman notes, an ancient historian’s credibility does not refer to trust in the sense of historical truth, rather trust in the sense of being unbiased. Therefore, this would suggest that Tacitus purposely created this account to truly further his praise of Livy. This praise is so laudatory that it appears to be borderline panegyrical, and, as a result, serves to affirm Tacitus’ view of praise.

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31 OLD *fides* 12a.
Section IV: Conclusion

Yet, if Tacitus uses this speech as a platform to voice his concerns with historiography, how might this relate to the digression of 4.32-4.33 where Tacitus also seems to layout something similar? Specifically, why might Tacitus choose to include his defense of praise in a speech rather than in the digression? The digression immediately precedes the speech, and the placement does not seem coincidental. Perhaps, then, the speech is an extension of the digression. Miller notes that speeches were frequently used by the historian to convey a thought they considered important.\(^\text{33}\) Therefore, it is possible that Tacitus may have used the speech as a continuation of his digression to further discuss aspects of historiography, yet in a fashion more entertaining to his readership. Woodman notes that while digressions tended to be a source of entertainment, Tacitus seems to state that a reader would not find many of the conventional pleasures a reader might find in reading histories. Therefore, Tacitus ironically states that there is little entertainment value to his work in a section that is traditionally seen in the context of fun.\(^\text{34}\) The speech then allows Tacitus to discuss the matter of praise (as well as use praise) in the action-packed environment of a trial. Furthermore, setting this discussion in a trial allows Tacitus to suggest that praise is literally on trial.

\[^{33}\] Miller (1975) 56.
\[^{34}\] Woodman (1988) 184.
The trial of Cremutius Cordus, which seems to fit well into the context of the digression of 4.32-4.33, appears to serve as Tacitus’ metaphorical defense of praise of the use of praise in the historical writings of Ancient Rome. Tacitus first seems to make such a claim in the *Agricola*, the preface of which makes it apparent that the regime and possibly Roman readership has grown hostile towards praise, and the speech of Cordus indicates that his beliefs on the matter were consistent when he wrote the *Annals*. Diction within the speech suggests that Cordus is defending the act of praise itself as opposed to his individual crimes. Furthermore, the excessive lauding of Livy seems to resemble a panegyric, which indicates that Tacitus puts into practice what he preaches.

It, thus, appears that Tacitus is still concerned with the “noble subject” and the praise that it demands. Simply because the emperors themselves do not appear to be a “noble subject” in the *Annales* does not mean that Tacitus no longer believes in its importance. This is evident by the fact that one may still find the noble subject in the *Annales*. In addition to Cordus, one might also argue that Germanicus is a “noble subject” deserving of praise. Yet Cordus is exemplary, because he not only is a “noble subject,” but seems to defend the very act of a historian writing about and praising the “noble subject.”
Bibliography


