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Great Men Can Exist Even under Bad Emperors: On Tacitus' New Virtue based on Obedience (*Obsequium*) and Moderation (*Moderatio*) in the *Agricola*¹

By Yuyao Sun

I. Introduction

As a historian recording events of imperial Rome, Tacitus, instead of splendid deeds by glorious heroes, sets himself the task of “linking together savage orders, constant accusations, deceitful friendships, the ruin of innocents, and the same reasons of death.”² The style of his works is therefore determined to be dark and grave (*gravis*), and not without despair and tragedies. That this tone is established in the historian's first work, the *Agricola*, a biography to his father-in-law, Gnaeus Iulius Agricola, is also certain. In the preface of the *Agricola* (3.3), Tacitus dedicates this biography to Agricola, hoping that it would bring him honor that was belated due to the jealousy of Domitian. Indeed, its publication was only made possible by the accessions of two good emperors, Nerva and Trajan, after Domitian, whose cruelty (*saevitia*) had brought countless deaths for the active senators and enforced silence for the rest (3.2). As a survivor of this cruelty, Tacitus would certainly not forget the extreme experience he had while living under Domitian's reign (45.1-2): the senate was besieged by arms, senators were murdered, and numerous noble women were exiled. To see Domitian and to be seen by him (*videre et aspici*) were equally dangerous, and not even shame (*pudor*) could stop his fierce face (*saevus ille vultus*) from marking down new victims. This surely made him more sensitive to the change of the relationship between emperors and the senate.³ Later in the preface, Tacitus recalls this experience of slavery (*servitus*) and compares it with that of the old age (*vetus aetas*) as two extremes between slavery and freedom (2.3). What went away with the fall of the Republic is the age of great men and splendid deeds; living under emperors, one is forced to change their understanding of greatness and virtue. “To succeed, or even to survive, *modesty* was requisite, and *discretion*; while ‘quies’ [...] became honorable in senator [,] ‘[l]ibertas’ itself, the dearest virtue of the noble, had to recede and surrender to ‘*obsequium*’⁴” (my own emphasis)⁵.

As a senator constantly promoted during the reign of Domitian,⁶ Tacitus was certainly conscious of this shift of power when he was writing Agricola's biography. In fact, beyond the surface of a belated encomium, the *Agricola* is also an apologia for those who still needed to serve Rome, its emperors, or tyrants, such as Agricola and Tacitus himself⁷. And, through his

¹ I am grateful to Professor Timothy Joseph for introducing the writings of Tacitus to me and giving me suggestions for revision.

² Ann.4.33: ‘*nos saeva iussa, continuas accusationes, fallaces amicitias, perniciem innocentium et easdem exitii causas coniungimus.*’

³ Oakley (2009) 186

⁴ Although Tacitus calls Nerva as the emperor who combined principate and freedom (*miscuerit principatum ac libertatem*, 3.1), he immediately mentions the weakness of this remedy. I think Tacitus is aware of the structural incompatibility between them, which cannot be eliminated simply by a good emperor. Therefore, the tension between them still exists, which is part of the reasons for Tacitus to discuss them throughout the *Agricola*. Also see Syme (1958a) 27.

⁵ Syme (1958a) 27

⁶ Hist.1.1: ‘*dignitatem nostram [...] a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim.*’

⁷ Birley (2009) 49

narrative of Agricola's life and career, Tacitus further "expounds the moral and political ideals of the new aristocracy"⁸ based on *obsequium* and *modestia*.

In this essay, I aim to begin examining these two qualities through Tacitus' use of the corresponding Latin words⁹ in past scholarship and contexts of the *Agricola* respectively so as to better understand the intention of Tacitus when describing Agricola as a man who has *obsequium* and *modestia* and as an ideal for the new aristocratic virtue.

II. *Obsequium* and *Modestia* in Scholarship and Contexts

A. *Obsequium*

Obsequium is a compound word coming from the prefix "ob-" and the verb "sequor" (*OLD obsequor*). The prefix "ob-" usually conveys a sense of opposition or confrontation (*OLD ob-*), as it does here. This word has five meanings in general: 1) the action or attitude of compliance (with desires, inclinations, etc.); 2) compliance with or consideration for the wishes of others, assiduous service or attention, deference, solicitude; 3) (of soldiers, subjects, etc.) compliance with orders, obedience, allegiance, discipline; 4) *feralia obsequia*, funeral rites or offerings; 5) the action of following a movement (*OLD obsequium*). Of these definitions the second and the third are particularly relevant to our reading of the *Agricola*. Out of four appearances of the word *obsequium* in the *Agricola*, at least three are related to the second definition (8.1¹⁰, 30.3, 42.5) and the last one is, in my opinion, more likely to follow the third definition (*virtute in obsequendo*, 8.3).

Although the frequency of this word is not high, its use usually gives direct delineation of Agricola's character, especially when coupled with another important word that we will discuss, *modestia* (c.f. 8.1, 8.3, 42.4); Tacitus has employed *obsequium* nowhere else except in Calgacus' speech (30.3). To be more specific, in 8.1, where Agricola was in service under the mild (*placidus*) governor Vettius Bolanus, he "controlled his energy and restrained his ardor in order that it would not grow too strong" (*temperavit Agricola vim suam ardoremque compescuit, ne increceret*, 8.1), since [he was] a man who was practiced in obedience (*peritus obsequi*, 8.1) and was well-trained to combine the advantageous things with honorable (*eruditusque utilia honestis miscere*, 8.1). Here the meaning of *obsequium* is quite clear, which denotes Agricola's *prudencia* and sense of proportion, that he was able to comply with the need of the *status quo* and could control his desire of demonstrating his valor, even though he was a soldier craving military glory (*intravitque animum militaris gloriae cupido*, 5.3). This *obsequium* made him modest in appearance and protected him from the potential jealousy from the governor or other people, while preparing the right moment for him where he could achieve things he wanted.

Immediately after this line, we find Vettius Bolanus was replaced by Petilius Cerialis (8.1), who gave Agricola space for achieving exemplary deeds (*habuerunt virtutes spatium exemplorum*, 8.2). Here, Agricola demonstrated a different *obsequium* that is rather military (*OLD 3*): serving the new governor in battlefields, by valor in the midst of complying¹¹ and modesty in reporting (*virtute in obsequendo, verecundia in praedicando*, 8.3), Agricola had won his glory while escaping jealousy (*extra invidiam nec extra gloriam*, 8.3). This idea of winning glory through following the order and escaping jealousy through modesty of speech is expressed

⁸ Syme (1958) 26

⁹ Because of the affinity between the derivative and root in Latin, all related forms of these two words (e.g. *obsequor* for *obsequium* and *modus, modicus, modestus, moderatio* for *modestia*) will also be examined in the following discussion.

¹⁰ For the different reading of the *peritus obsequi* as the gen. of *obsequium* or as inf., see Woodman (2014) 118.

¹¹ For this sense of *obsequium*, see Woodman (2014) 119

neatly by the chiasmus¹², which connects his valor and glory to his innate quality of being able to comply with orders. In this case, *obsequium* shows him as a well-trained and disciplined soldier as well as his *industria* and *vigor* that allowed him to serve diligently and energetically.

Syme has also provided a very convincing definition of *obsequium*, which may help us connect the two possible meanings of this word discussed above: “the word denotes rational deference to authority—the obedience which an officer owes to his commander, a senator to the Senate, an emperor to the gods of the Roman State.”¹³

B. Modestia

Modestia is etymologically related to *modus*, which generally means measure (*OLD modus*). Tacitus has used it three times throughout the work (20.2, 30.3, 42.4), words related to it seven times, such as *modus*, *moderatio*, *modicus*, *moderatus* (4.5, 5.1, 7.6, 18.2, 24.3, 40.4, 42.4). The first appearance of *modestia* is in chapter 20, when Agricola finally becomes the governor of Britain and adopts a rather aggressive tactic in the military campaign: “But as the season came, with army mustered, he was everywhere on the march, praising discipline, rounding up stragglers” (*sed ubi aestas advenit, contracto exercitu multus in agmine, laudare modestiam, disiectos coercere*, 20.2). In this case, the word *modestia* has the meaning of “discipline” or “respect for order” (*OLD 2*), which is something that Agricola wanted to cultivate in his army. But, unlike in other places where Tacitus simply uses *disciplina* (16.5, 28.1), here, this particular choice of word denotes Agricola’s quintessential preference for moderation and restraint (*modus*).¹⁴

In the other two instances where Tacitus used this word (30.3, 42.4), its meaning is closer to “self-effacement” or “modesty” (*OLD 3b*), arguably the most essential quality Agricola was said to possess. Through various usages of words related to *modus*, the emphasis is given throughout this biography: Agricola’s youthful zeal for philosophy was mediated through his mother’s *prudencia*, and by his reason and age (*ratio et aetas*) “he retained a sense of proportion, the most difficult thing, from philosophy” (*retinuitque, quod est difficillimum, ex sapientia modum*, 4.3). Later, when he became a military tribune, he served and learned¹⁵ from Suetonius Paulinus, an example for moderation and restraint (*diligenti ac moderato duci*, 5.1). As a praetor, he set up festivals and other trivial events along a middle course consisting of reason and lavishness (*ludos et inania honoris medio rationis atque abundantiae duxit*, 6.4). After he quelled the mutiny in his legion, he refused to take credit for what he had achieved with “unusual modesty” (*rarissima moderatione*, 7.1). Then, when he was recalled from Britain as a great governor, he entered Rome at night, avoiding visitation with friends, being “modest in demeanor and affable in conversation” (*cultu modicus, sermone facilis*, 40.3) so as to balance his reputation among others.

Indeed, since any action that calls forth fame with stubbornness and useless display of freedom would bring death, this unusual modesty is surely an indispensable quality with which Agricola was able to, at least temporarily, avoid the envy and enmity of the cruel emperor Domitian. (*moderatione tamen prudentiaque Agricolae leniebatur, quia non contumacia neque inani iactatione libertatis famam fatumque provocabat*, 42.3) As Oakley pointed out, Tacitus describes Agricola as a classic exemplar of *modestia*¹⁶, a quality that he tries to advocate in front

¹² Woodman (2014) 119 “*virtute in obsequendo — nec extra gloriam; verecundia in praedicando — extra invidiam.*”

¹³ Syme (1958a) 28

¹⁴ Woodman (2014) 197

¹⁵ Woodman (2014) 103

¹⁶ Oakley (2009) 192

of his fellow aristocratic audience. However, there are instances where Tacitus does not use *modus*-related words in the meanings discussed above. This different usage of the word, usually as *modicus*, has the sense of “moderate in size, number, amount, etc” (*OLD 2a*).¹⁷

To conclude, except for a few different usages, Tacitus frequently employs words related to *modus* when he is narrating Agricola, his activities, and his demeanor, either when he was a public figure in Britain or when he was interacting with men of higher status, such as Domitian. And by doing so, Tacitus has presented Agricola to his readers as a man who has a sense of proportion and modesty (*modestia*).

Now we have examined Tacitus’ uses of *obsequium* and *modestia*, and found that he mainly employs them to portray Agricola’s character: compliance and modesty that allowed him to avoid jealousy from others and to continually serve Rome. However, these two words were not only used for Agricola; we find them in the speech of another important figure in this biography, Calgacus.

III. *Obsequium* and *Modestia* in Calgacus’ Episode

The leader of the Caledonians, Calgacus’ significance in the battle of Mons Graupius cannot be underestimated. It is through this battle, as Martin pointed out, that Agricola reached the climax of his career and was rightfully regarded as a *vir magnus*.¹⁸ To this end, considerable space for this battle (ten chapters) is given by Tacitus, along with an extraordinary amount of details compared with those of his previous six years. Moreover, the battle is separated from the general account by the insertion of the Usipi episode (28), which provides a structural break-off before the culminating events of Agricola’s governorship.¹⁹ Lastly, the “ring structure” of this work puts further emphasis on the battle, as it structurally ends the account of Agricola’s military career²⁰.

Back to Calgacus himself. Being the leader of this battle, he seemed to be the exemplar of the old, republican virtue. He was a man of outstanding courage and birth (*virtute et genere praestans*, 29.4) and was attributing the same characteristics to other Britons (*virtus porro ac ferocia subiectorum ingrata imperantibus*, 31.3). Besides, he employed familial piety to encourage his soldiers (31), another feature for traditional Roman virtue²¹. This impression is further developed in his speech. Compared with that of Agricola, Calgacus’ speech is significantly longer and more passionate, often with direct reference to the language of Roman declamation.²² More importantly, this speech deals with the relationship between freedom and slavery, an underlying motif of the *Agricola*, and in it Calgacus exhorts his fellow soldiers to give up hope for pardon (*sublata spe veniae*) and only pursue freedom. It is noteworthy that in his speech alone there are eight occurrences of words related to slavery and four of *libertas*, which are almost equal to those of *obsequium* and *modestia* throughout the work; and, in Agricola’s speech, there is no reference to terms like these.

In this case, we could argue for a parallel between Romans and Britons.²³ Agricola is the example for a new aristocratic virtue founded on modesty and compliance, while Calgacus is the symbol for ancient, republican virtue that emphasizes freedom and ostentatious valor, the ones

¹⁷ “a small band of auxiliaries” (*modica auxiliorum manu*, 18.2); “a small number of auxiliaries” (*saepe ex eo audivi legione una et modicis auxiliis debellari obtinerique Hiberniam posse*, 24.3).

¹⁸ Martin (1981) 43

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Woodman (2014) 2

²¹ Clarke (2001) 105

²² Martin (1981) 44

²³ Liebeschuetz (1966) 139

Agricola tried to avoid.²⁴ There is no middle path acceptable for Calgacus, since he believed “one could only escape [Romans’] arrogance through compliance and modesty *in vain* (*superbiam frustra per obsequium ac modestiam effugias*, 30.3).” By using these two words that Agricola exemplified here, Tacitus indicates that Calgacus not only rejected the possibility of a milder alternative to the battle based on compliance and modesty, but also indirectly rebutted the new political ideal symbolized by Agricola. Eventually, his belief that Romans’ *saevitia* could only be avoided by fighting and military confrontation brought utter annihilation to his people as well as himself. In other words, Calgacus only offered two choices for his people: death or fight, without the potential third option founded on *obsequium* and *modestia*²⁵. In this case, the destruction of Calgacus could be an implicit critique of Tacitus towards the old virtue based on ostentation useless to the common good.²⁶

IV. Concluding Agricola’s Life

If Tacitus only implicitly criticizes the old, republican virtue in the battle of Mons Graupius, in 42.4 he openly confronts the believers of that kind of virtue: “Let them know, who are accustomed to admire unlawful conduct, that even under bad emperors can great men exist, that compliance and modesty, if hard work and energy be present, could reach the level of praise where many through precipitous paths [have reached], but [they, i.e. *plerique*] became famous with ostentatious death for no use of common good.”²⁷ (*sciunt, quibus moris est illicita 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 ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt*, 42.4)

The power of the sentence comes from its use of a jussive subjunctive (*sciunt*), which almost enables Tacitus to directly address those senators who “are accustomed to admire unlawful conduct²⁸ (i.e. not permitted by the emperor²⁹)” or those who believe that their ideals can only be defended through a death useless to the common good. His message is, as we have already seen, that even under principes like Domitian, whose *invidia* does not allow any ostentation and display of old virtue, men could still be glorious in a different way based on *obsequium* and *modestia*. By this address, Tacitus deliberately puts forward qualities for praise which would otherwise have been thought unworthy of the dignity of a senator.³⁰

²⁴ Therefore, I disagree with Clarke’s view on Agricola, where she claims that Agricola, if he had not been living at the time of Domitian, would have been someone like Calgacus. Agricola’s nature, as we already see above, lies precisely in his extraordinary sense of proportion and modesty, which is something Calgacus didn’t have, nor would like to appreciate; they are rather two different types of person. c. f. Clarke (2001) 106.

²⁵ This may be the kind of servitude described in chapter 21, which is still better than destruction.

²⁶ Woodman (2014) 23. Interestingly, after the eloquent speech, Calgacus disappeared from the rest of the battle; what was left was the ruin of Calgacus’ armies, loss of Britain, and endless suffering of his people. On the contrary, Agricola’s activities were constantly emphasized, and ultimately it was through his judgement and discretion that Rome won the battle, c.f. 35.4, 37.1, 37.4. This sharp contrast between reality and appearance (Agricola’s lack of eloquence and effectiveness of judgment v.s. Calgacus’ eloquence and lack of real commands) is a constant theme of Tacitus’ work, and here it further illustrates the harm and uselessness of ostentation common to both Calgacus and Romans of old virtue.

²⁷ I followed suggestions from Ogilvie and Richmond in translating the latter half of the sentence. For difficulties in interpretation, see Woodman (2014) 302.

²⁸ c.f. *quibus magnos viros per ambitionem aestimare mos est*, 40.4

²⁹ Woodman (2014) 302

³⁰ Liebeschuetz (1966) 130

However, while attacking that different view of *vir magnus*, Tacitus also further elucidates his new aristocratic ideal with his use of these two words: *obsequium* and *modestia* are only the qualities that make a great man if there are *industria* and *vigor*. In other words, greatness of man for Tacitus is not merely inactivity and measureless compliance; *obsequium* and *modestia* are rather qualities that allow industrious men like Agricola to avoid the jealousy (*invidia*) and cruelty (*saevitia*) of bad emperors and to serve the common good (*res publica*) with *industria* and *vigor*. Thus, what Tacitus is advocating through the example of Agricola has nothing to do with becoming a servant or a mere conformist; what lies behind his new aristocratic ideal is a kind of political realism that focuses on the reality and effectiveness, that knows how to combine “the advantageous things with honorable” (*utilia honestis miscere*, 8.1).

That Agricola is no less courageous than those believers of old virtue is also shown in the last chapter before the epilogue. In chapter 43, immediately after Tacitus indirectly condemns the ostentatious death (*ambitiosa mors*, 42.4), Agricola’s own death is narrated (*Finis vitae eius*, 43.1). This juxtaposition of deaths is surely not arbitrary. As Liebeschuetz commented: “Agricola is to be compared with the opposition groups not only in the manner of his life but in his deaths. It seems as if Tacitus could not mention the deaths of the members of the opposition group and thus recall what men felt most admirable about them, namely their willingness to die for their ideals, without feeling challenged to show that Agricola, despite his cautious demeanor, had been not less brave than they”³¹ and was the one who is to be remembered by posterity (43.1).

We could even say that it was precisely his *industria* and *vigor* under *obsequium* and *modestia* that incurred Domitian’s envy and caused the poisoning. Because, although Agricola tried to be compliant and modest, his *deeds* inevitably brought him fame, and his denial of fame itself made him even more famous (*dissimulatione famae famam auxit*, 18.7). Under his modest appearance and self-effacement, Agricola kept serving Rome in a different, realistic, and timely way.

In conclusion, in this paper I examined “obedience” and “moderation” through Tacitus’ uses of related Latin words in the *Agricola*: they are primarily used to describe Agricola’s character as a man who has these two qualities, which allow him to avoid the jealousy of others; then, in the Calgacus episode, Tacitus attributes the destruction of Calgacus and his armies to the fact that Calgacus did not have these qualities, and thus indirectly criticizes those who reject them; lastly, Tacitus addresses these two qualities as the new aristocratic virtues (42.4) and, by coupling them with *industria* and *vigor*, further explains this new aristocratic ideal.

V. Epilogue

Tacitus, when commenting on the meaning of history, once said: “so, with the situation conversed and there being no other salvation for affairs than if one man is in command, it will prove of advantage that these matters are researched and recorded, because few men with discretion distinguish the honorable from the baser, the useful from the harmful, many are taught by others’ outcomes.”³² If Agricola could be one of the few people that Tacitus deems capable of “distinguishing the honorable from the baser and the useful from the harmful,” we as readers of Tacitus might be the majority taught by his Agricola, as by other examples in his works. Indeed, the *Agricola* is particularly meaningful to the author, as he saw so many places of the world in which the cruelty of age was no less dangerous than that of Domitian, the enforced silence no less dreadful than that which Tacitus and his father-in-law experienced themselves, and the

³¹ Liebeschuetz (1966) 131

³² Ann.4.33.2: ‘*sic converso statu neque alia rerum salute quam si unus imperitet, haec conquiri tradique in rem fuerit, quia pauci prudentia honesta ab deterioribus, utilia ab noxiis discernunt, plures aliorum eventis docentur.*’

despair so thoroughly permeated that one was either corrupted or destroyed; others, at the same time, seemed to be already on the way to principate, since mutual understanding was becoming less possible, freedom in acting and speaking rather closer to some form of license (*licentia*) or an ostentation (*ambitio*) of will or an enhancement of stubbornness (*contumacia*). The author was thus compelled to ponder over whether this is the destiny of our age, and, if so, besides praying for a good emperor, what is left to us, especially as the good fortune of the age only rarely befalls us and power itself could also be morally depraved. It was at this point that the author encountered the *Agricola*, and reading this short piece was a mixture of happiness and tears: the reign of Domitian is doubtlessly a period of despair and darkness, yet out of this darkness there is still hope and light, for who would deny that Tacitus has provided us a memorable example of heroism with his *Agricola*? This heroism is indeed different from what is commonly praised even up to this day, since it neither promotes display of one's determination for undertakings nor marvels at the steepness and extraordinariness of one's action. However, as different ages require different kinds of heroes and greatness, it nevertheless remains illuminating — particularly for those whose age is becoming more and more similar to that of Domitian: at least we understand that we could avoid falling into a state of servitude, that greatness might not be achieved through a rather self-centered ostentation and stubbornness, that men can still be great in a bad time — which is both a consolation and an encouragement. It is for this reason that the author realizes an increasing urgency and importance of reading and re-reading Tacitus, for his history could also be our history, and, in some other places of the world, is surely already part of it. This essay is written for a better understanding of the rather different greatness, centered on “obedience” (*obsequium*) and “moderation” (*moderatio*), depicted by Tacitus in the *Agricola*, an issue in which the author is greatly interested and finds connection to his age; for this reason he hopes it would reach to the next person also pondering over questions of this kind as well as the general audience.

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