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**The Speeches of Boudicca and Calgacus:
Tacitus's Unified Text of Imperial Critique**

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I. Introduction

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus often fashioned speeches by a systematic ordering, where one speech repudiates the other. In this paper I will look closely at two sets of juxtaposed speeches. The first set, from the *Agricola*, includes speeches by Calgacus, the chieftain of the Caledonians in Britain, and Gnaeus Julius Agricola, Roman governor of Britain from 78 to 87 A.D. (*Agr.* 30-34). The second set, from the *Annales*, consists of those by Boudicca, the widowed queen of the Iceni in Britain, and Suetonius Paulinus, the Roman governor of Britain from 58 to 61 A.D. (*Ann.* 14.35-36). The two British leaders have a common cause: overthrowing the Roman rule embodied by these governors. Scholars devote much of their attention to the relationship of the speech of Boudicca against Paulinus', and even more, to the speech of Calgacus against Agricola's; what has received less treatment is the relationship between the lamentations, pleas, and exhortations of the two Britons. I will argue here that Tacitus meant for their speeches to be read together. In this reading, the speech of Boudicca in the *Annales*, written roughly twenty years after the speech of Calgacus in the *Agricola*, completes Tacitus' presentation of Roman injustice by placing the argument in a woman's voice.

In the *Agricola*, a biographical panegyric¹ published in 98 A.D., Tacitus' primary objective is to extol the virtues of his father-in-law, whom he reveres and respects as a testament that "great men can live even under evil emperors" (*posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse, Agr.* 42.4). Many of Agricola's accolades rely on his military prowess. Accordingly, the majority of the historical narrative discusses Agricola's achievements as a commander in Britain. In 78 A.D., Agricola became the governor of Britain, and assumed the role of a conquering commander. From chapters eighteen to thirty, Tacitus diverts some attention from his subject, Agricola, to focus on a larger topic, Roman dominion over Britain. The climax of this is in the year 84 A.D., when Agricola plans to strike at the Caledonians (*Agr.* 29.2-3). The battle commences at Mons Graupius, a place where Calgacus describes his people as, "situated in the innermost parts," of Britain (*in ipsis penetralibus siti. Agr.* 30.2). Tacitus devotes more attention to this one battle than to the prior six years of Agricola's governorship.² The ultimate outcome of the battle is the defeat of

1 For more information on the nature of the *Agricola* see Borca (1996) 337.

2 Martin (1981) 43.

Calgacus and the Caledonians. This is the context in which Tacitus places the speech of Calgacus.

Agricola's early career is also interesting for the argument I am making, because he plays a pivotal role in suppressing the Boudiccan Rebellion of the year 60 A.D., as an apprentice to Suetonius Paulinus (*Agr.* 5.3).³ Tacitus discusses the plight of Boudicca and the Iceni in greater detail in *Annales XIV*, published roughly twenty years after the *Agricola*. The narrative of *Annales XIV* covers the Neronian years. Agricola is not the protagonist, and does not figure at all in the Boudiccan account of the *Annales*. Tacitus discusses the rebellion between chapters twenty-nine and thirty-nine. During these chapters he describes the Iceni and their king, Prasutagus, as a people deceived by the Romans. Prasutagus names Nero as his heir, assuming that his kingdom will benefit from the arrangement. Instead, the Romans break their promise and turn on Prasutagus, "His kingdom was devastated by centurions, and his house was devastated by slaves, as if they were spoils" (*adeo ut regnum per centuriones, domus per servos velut capta vastarentur, Ann.* 14.31.1). Tacitus introduces Prasutagus' wife, Boudicca, and her misery: "Boudicca was broken by scourging, and her daughters were violated by rape" (*Boudicca adfecta et filiae stupro violatae sunt, Ann.* 14.31.1). Subsequently, Boudicca incites a rebellion that is at first successful, but ultimately faces defeat at the hands of Suetonius Paulinus at the Battle of London. Her speech, like Calgacus', comes before the fall.

Any analysis of either of these speeches necessitates an understanding of the constructs of Roman historiography. One of the controversies in scholarship that pertains to the study of Calgacus' speech, with respect to Boudicca's, regards the employment of *oratio obliqua* instead of *oratio recta*. In this case, the speech of Boudicca is in *oratio obliqua*, indirect speech, whereas the speech of Calgacus is in *oratio recta*, direct speech. According to Eric Adler, this has no bearing on the veracity of the speeches.⁴ Moreover, the speeches themselves are most likely fabrications of Tacitus, which is in keeping with a larger tradition of ancient historiographical speech writing.⁵ All things considered, this conclusion is probably accurate. For one, it is hard to imagine an immense and motivating pre-battle harangue in an era without sound amplification. Second, Tacitus was devoid of sources for either of these speeches. It is highly unlikely that either speaker delivered an address in Latin, or that a Roman who understood languages indigenous to Britain was present at either speech. Another purpose behind the inclusion of the speeches might have to do with some vanity on the part of Tacitus, the orator "It seems clear that many – if not all – ancient historians used their orations to some extent as opportunities to demonstrate their rhetorical prowess."⁶ This is one logical explanation for the eloquence of Calgacus' speech.

Another point that influenced the style of the speeches was the expectation on the part of the Roman audiences. That it was conventional to include such paired speeches in ancient historiography is not in doubt.⁷ Yet, they may have served an even greater purpose, "in history as in other branches of literature, monotony was to be

3 For dating the Boudiccan Revolt see: Carrol (1979).

4 Adler (2011) 8. For more on this topic see: Laird (1999) 21-51. For the sake of this paper, the Laird interpretation on the use of *oratio recta* versus *oratio obliqua* will be considered most apt.

5 Adler, 123. See Also: Syme (1958) 317.

6 *Ibid.*, 11.

7 *Ibid.*, 8.

avoided at all costs.”⁸ The orator Quintilian emphasizes this point while discussing the importance of vivid writing through description of disaster scenes in his handbook (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*. 8.3.67-70). If the ancient authors and audiences lauded detailed accounts, then Boudicca’s speech, though not as oratorically and stylistically embellished as Calgacus’, was still its natural successor for its more graphic retelling of horrors. With the context of the speeches established, I will move now to a discussion of the language and themes that link the speeches of Boudicca and Calgacus together.

II. The Speech of Calgacus

Calgacus’ speech acts as an appeal to his people to fight, and to win, for the sake of liberty over the horror of servility. The contrast between his free people and the Roman conquerors is stark. For Calgacus the Romans represent an evil and greedy people motivated by domination: “now that all the lands are left to devastation, they scrutinize the sea: if their enemy is rich, they are avaricious, if poor, they are ambitious,” (*postquam cuncta vastantibus defuere terrae, iam mare scrutantur: si locuples hostes est, avari, si pauper, ambitiosi, quos, Agr. 30.4*). The Romans, he concludes, only know how to “make desolation, and they call it peace” (*solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant, Agr. 30.5*).⁹ To attain their goals Calgacus presents the Caledonians with two options: war, and leadership, or chains and slavery, “Here the leader, here the army, there the tributes and metals and other penalties for slaves” (*hic dux, hic exercitus: ibi tribute et metalla et ceterae servientium poenae, Agr. 32.4*). Though they meet with defeat, Tacitus respects the Caledonians and says that some exhibited “courage” (*virtus, Agr. 37.3*)¹⁰

This reading of the speech, as anti-imperialist is accurate, but incomplete. Indeed, Birley calls this, “a set of standard criticisms, similar to those put in the mouth of Critognatus (Caesar, *De Bello Gall.* 7.77) or in Mithradates’ Letter (Sallust. *Historiae.* 4.69).”¹¹ Ergo, Calgacus becomes the mighty champion of *libertas*. This standard view naturally links Calgacus’ speech and Agricola’s, where Tacitus lionizes Calgacus’ plea for liberty over Agricola’s response. In fact, Calgacus’ speech is far longer than Agricola’s, Suetonius Paulinus’, and Boudicca’s, and his eloquence in the Latin language surpasses his Roman counterparts’.¹²

Another theme from Calgacus’ speech on which I would like to concentrate is the sexual misconduct of the Romans. If the Romans desire to dominate the world, then the speech of Calgacus manifests this using language that is sexual in nature. Indeed, when he discusses the Roman faults such as avarice (*Agr. 30.4*), he accompanies the discussion with language of the sexual, calling the Romans the “Ravagers of the world,” (*raptores orbis, Agr. 30.4*). The use of the word *raptor* by Tacitus indicates special significance because it is an extraordinary word in the Tacitean lexicon. Its only other occurrence is in *Historiae* 2.86.1.¹³ To conclude this statement, Tacitus writes: “Neither the East nor the West has satisfied

8 Roberts (1988) 118.

9 So impressed with his own aphorism, Tacitus recycled it in the *Histories* in the enemy speech of Civilis: Bosworth (2004) 558.

10 Bews (1987) 206.

11 Birley (2009) 58.

12 Bosworth (2004) 558.

13 Bews (1987) 207.

[them]: alone of all they covet wealth and deprivation with equal passion," (*non Oriens, non Occidens satiaverit: soli omnium opes atque inopiam pari affectu concupiscunt*, Agr. 30.4). Here, Oakley regards that the words *concupisco*, *raptor*, and *satio* as erotic,¹⁴ but this explanation is not bold enough. In fact, it is hard to read *affectus* without sexual connotation. Though *affectus* signifies feeling and emotion, its meaning can relate to passion.¹⁵ Further, the concept of 'desiring' (*concupisco*) is particularly rich in this passage, where Tacitus intensifies the verb *cupio* with both the *con-* prefix and the inceptive suffix *-sco*. Furthermore, the famous aphorism of Calgacus' speech continues this point, "Abduction, slaughter, rape they call empire under false names," (*auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium...appellant*, Agr. 30.5). Tacitus emphasizes the word *rapere* by its placement as last in the triad of infinitives. The picture Tacitus paints of the Romans is of insatiable ravagers of the world. Extrapolating this image of Roman soldiers as insatiable ravagers to the notion of the empire; perhaps Tacitus is questioning Roman expansion as a prolonged series of sexual crimes.¹⁶

Tacitus has Calgacus persist in his excoriation of Roman sexual malpractice in the second and third chapters of his address in more concrete terms: "Even if our wives and sisters escape the enemy's libido, they are defiled by illicit intercourse by the name of friends and guests," (*coniuges sororesque etiam si hostilem libidinem effugerunt, nomine amicorum atque hospitem polluuntur*, Agr. 31.1). Whereas Calgacus earlier described the Romans in metaphorical terms, here he appeals to his troops, many of whose wives and sisters could have experienced violation at the hands of the Romans.¹⁷ Even in his final chapter he belabors this motif: "Or do you believe that the Romans have the same courage in war as lasciviousness in peace?" (*An eandem Romanis in bello virtutem quam in pace lasciviam adesse creditis*, Agr. 32.1). Though *lascivia* can have a positive or playful meaning in Latin, Tacitus tends to give it a negative definition such as "wantonness," or "lack of restraint, indiscipline."¹⁸ This final meaning not only discredits the Roman fighting ability, but also acts as a reminder for the Britons about why they go to war. The Romans are lustful men, and not necessarily disciplined soldiers.

If we are reading Calgacus' argument as an assertion of liberty, then Tacitus imbues this element of the speech with sexual imagery as well. When Tacitus explains how well situated the Caledonians' lands are, he says, "We even held our eyes away from contact and the violation of domination," (*oculos quoque a contactu dominationis involatos habebamus*, Agr. 30.2).¹⁹ *Contactus* derives from *contingo*,

14 Oakley (2009) 197.

15 "Affectus." Oxford Latin Dictionary. 6

16 I am not suggesting that Tacitus was not a loyal Roman, or that he was unhappy to see Roman military victory; however, suggesting that Tacitus saw the dangers of expanding an empire too rapidly is not out of the question. After all, Agricola's recall from Britain outraged Tacitus, yet a possible explanation for his removal by Domitian was that the British lands were not valuable enough to expend resources on, particularly Roman legions.

17 The second part of this clause, entailing the deceit of the Romans, might also be a precursor to the deceit of Prasutagus (*Annales* 14.31.1)

18 "Lascivia." Oxford Latin Dictionary. 3b,c.)

19 Once again, it is difficult not to recall the plight of Boudicca's daughters who were violated by rape, (*filiae stupro violatae sunt*, *Annales*, 14.31.1)

and hence implies a physical handling, and not just a metaphorical one. When Calgacus contrasts the Caledonians' cause with that of the failed Brigantes (*Agr.* 31.4), Tacitus reiterates this notion of freedom from harm: "We are untouched and undominated," (*nos integri et indomiti, Agr.* 31.4). Calgacus' comparison is obvious; the Romans sexually mistreated the Brigantes, and so the Brigantes could not succeed, but the Caledonians remain a whole and unviolated nation so, conversely, a victory is plausible. Calgacus' argument separates the Caledonians, to some extent, from the personalized horror of rape and sexual misconduct.

III. The Speech of Boudicca, Advancing Calgacus

Tacitus uses the same language of sexual misconduct in the more personal speech of Boudicca, to render his earlier arguments more potent. In the role of a narrator of historical events Tacitus immediately emphasizes the femininity of Boudicca: "Under the leadership of Boudicca a woman of noble descent (for truly they did not distinguish sex among rulers)," (*Boudicca generis regii femina duce (neque enim sexum in imperiis discernunt), Agr.* 16.1). Here, as a historian, Tacitus defines Boudicca's role not only as a leader, but also as a woman. His speech of Calgacus furthers this point, "With a woman leader, the Brigantes burned the colony," (*Brigantes femina duce exurere coloniam, Agr.* 31.4). Here, through the voice of Calgacus, the reference to Boudicca as a *femina dux* stresses the femininity of Boudicca. Consequently, Boudicca and the Iceni by association are feminized before their formal treatment in the *Annales*.

In the *Annales*, Tacitus takes the opportunity to feminize Boudicca again, this time through her own voice: "She testified that it was indeed customary for the Britons to wage war under the leadership of women" (*solitum quidem Britannis feminarum ductu bellare testabatur, Ann.* 14.35.1). This familiar trope connects the speech of Boudicca with the *Agricola*, and specifically with Calgacus' speech. Needless to say, any audience of Britons would know about the customs of their own people.²⁰ Since Tacitus' intention was to reach out to Roman audiences, he desired a certain effect on those audiences; he wanted to underscore Boudicca's position as a female monarch.

Tacitus pursues the feminine portrayal of Boudicca and her Iceni throughout the chapters on the rebellion. For one, Tacitus describes the Iceni in the following way: "the forces of the Britons were prancing through the crowds and gatherings," (*Britannorum copiae passim per catervas et turmas exultabant, Ann.* 14.34.2). Here is the sole instance where Tacitus uses *exulto* in the *Annales*.²¹ Certainly, an army of prancing Britons would not intimidate the more stoic, and organized Roman soldiers. Even through the speech of Boudicca Tacitus asserts the disorderliness of the Iceni: "Not even were they about to bear the noise and clamor of so many thousands," (*ne strepitum quidem clamorem tot milium, Ann.* 14.35.2). As Shumate discusses, the Romans thought that displays of unorganized and disorderly behavior was feminine. They preferred the stoic displays of emotionlessness.²²

20 Adler (2011) 124.

21 Roberts (1988) 122.

22 Shumate (2006) 99.

In line with the characterization of the Iceni as a clamorous and shrieking horde, Boudicca's speech follows a course more focused on revenge for defilement. This theme would have excited Roman audiences for its graphic and violent nature.²³ Boudicca "seeks revenge for her lost liberty, her body abused by scourging, the chastity of her daughters being trespassed upon," (*libertatem amissam, confectum verberibus corpus, contrectatam filiarum pudicitiam ulcisci, Ann. 14.35.1*).²⁴ Unlike Calgacus, she does not solicit aid from her people as something better for their society, but, "as one of the people," (*ut unam e vulgo, Ann. 14.35.1*); she beseeches her compatriots for aid in her personal vendetta. Boudicca's plea strikes a different tone than Calgacus' exhortation to fight for *libertas*, yet she has many of the same complaints about the Romans. Reminiscent of Calgacus' speech Tacitus also chastises the Roman lustful desires: "The desires of the Romans up to this point left behind not even the bodies, old age, or maidenhood undefiled," (*eo propectas Romanorum cupidines, ut non corpora, ne senectam quidem aut virginitatem impollutam relinquunt, Ann. 14.35.1*).²⁵ In this case the *virginitas impolluta* could be a reference to the defilement of her own daughters, mentioned twice in the *Annales*. Tacitus employs the verb, "*polluuntur*" in a similar way in *Agricola* 31.1-2, "even if our wives and sister have fled the desires of the enemy, they are defiled under the name of friends and guests," (*coniuges sororesque etiam si hostilem libidinem effugerunt, nomine amicorum atque hospitum polluuntur, Agr. 31.1-2*). In this way, Boudicca's speech is more graphic because it is more personal. Her assault on the Roman offenses has the intimate touch that Calgacus can only vaguely allude to (*Agr. 31.1*). Furthermore, Boudicca and the Iceni are better suited to respond to the injustice of rape because Tacitus characterizes them with typically feminine traits. Tacitus' readership could more poignantly respond with the horrible offenses of rape when committed against female subjects.²⁶

IV. Conclusion

In the two sets of juxtaposed speeches, Tacitus had a definite purpose: to critique on the Roman Empire through the barbarians, Boudicca and Calgacus. He reveals this link to posterity in the themes and language he uses. In the *Agricola*, he makes allusions to Boudicca, and in Boudicca's speech he uses language that is similar to, if not identical to, Calgacus'. Reading them together is imperative, because with Boudicca's injured feminine voice Tacitus more vividly appeals to the Roman audience. Only together do the speeches of Boudicca and Calgacus complete Tacitus' critique on Roman imperial abuses.

The conclusion from my interpretation and the evidence suggesting its veracity demand a new inquiry into Tacitus and his works. Was Tacitus an imperialist, or was he an anti-imperialist? This question is not particularly easy to answer, and has troubled the greatest of Tacitean scholars. One approach to answering it is to avoid the question altogether, and conjecture that Tacitus, in his denunciation of imperial abuses was not making an argument either for or against

24 It is interesting that among this list of grievances she does not include the betrayal and murder of her husband Prasutagus.

25 See: G.M. Pauk (1982). 144-155, on conventional details in the raid of a city.

26 Rutherford (2010) 329.

empire, but simply acting as a moralist.²⁷ This answer certainly has some validity. Tacitus does show strong moral disgust at the Roman actions in the speeches of Boudicca and Calgacus. Furthermore, it is fitting that Tacitus should condemn the Roman soldiers for being rapists, because rape and sexual misconduct were certainly considered vile in Roman culture, law, and historiography. The most outstanding example of a detestable rape is that of Lucretia by Sextus Tarquinius narrated most memorably by Livy in Book 1.57-58 in his *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*. Livy portrays the rape scene as personal and graphic. He vilifies Sextus Tarquinius, and he asserts Lucretia's femininity just as Tacitus would later emphasize Boudicca's. Lucretia displays a vivid sense of honor that leads to her tragic death, and like Tacitus' Boudicca, she calls for revenge against her rapist, Sextus Tarquinius. Tacitus' Roman audience knew Lucretia's story well, and from it undoubtedly abhorred rape, which makes Tacitus' moralistic stance an acceptable part of the historiographical tradition.

The second explanation, which is more common, belongs chiefly to Ronald Syme. His interpretation emphasizes the difficulty in understanding Tacitus and suggests that Tacitus' view on Empire was multi-faceted:

Did he desire and argue that Rome should revert to a policy of aggrandizement? No unequivocal answer can be given. If warfare (some might hope) dispelled the torpor and inertia of the times, conquest could disturb the equilibrium of the Empire, especially if it went beyond Euphrates and Tigris. Dominion produced evil and paradoxical consequences. The victors were vanquished by peace. Empire abroad engendered despotism at home. Marcus Brutus saw that dilemma long ago. Better forfeit empire than forfeit liberty—such was the answer of the Republican.²⁸

How Syme reached this conclusion is easily understandable: it seems that Tacitus simply shows two different opinions. On the one hand, his speeches through the voices of the conquered such as Boudicca and Calgacus are blatant indications of the horror of Roman conquest. He almost equates Roman military presence with violence, rape, and robbery.²⁹ Yet, Tacitus understood that, "Roman power was something more than a product of craft and violence."³⁰ What is more, as Syme reminds us, "Tacitus looks back with longing on the martial Republic, and he extols the more recent conquerors."³¹ In a certain sense, this ambiguity left to posterity by Tacitus might suggest that the best interpretation is not that Tacitus' view was multi-faceted, but that he was a moralist. In other words, Tacitus could have rectified the two seemingly opposing positions by claiming that Empire was right and just so long as its implementation was morally sound.

The final explanation, which is most logical, especially given the notion that Tacitus intended for the speeches of Calgacus and Boudicca to read as a unified whole, is that Tacitus' opinion on empire evolved. The work of Ettore Paratore champions this position. He notes that in the *Agricola* 14-16, Tacitus'

27 For more on historians' views on Tacitus as a moralist see: Syme (1958) 521. Here Syme discusses a few instances of Tacitus' moral positions. He even suggests that Tacitus wrote the *Annales* as a historian analyzing morals, "as the proper and principal function of history..."

28 Syme (1958) 530.

29 Ibid., 529.

30 Ibid., 529.

31 Ibid., 530.

earlier work, "when there is mention of the attack on the island of Mona in AD 61 (Agr. 14), there is silence about the excesses committed by the Romans."³² For a specific example Paratore offers the introduction of Boudicca, as a female leader, where in the *Agricola* Tacitus writes, "for they do not discern sex in rulers," (*neque enim sexum in imperiis discernunt*, Agr. 16.1). Whereas in the *Annales* Tacitus not only writes that Boudicca testified to the custom of having female leaders but also that she "seeks revenge for her lost liberty, her body abused by scourging, the chastity of her daughters being tread upon," (*libertatem amissam, confectum verberibus corpus, contrectatam filiarum pudicitiam ulcisci*, Ann. 14.35.1).³³ His claim is that the discrepancies in the Boudiccan accounts between the *Agricola* and the *Annales* are the result of a shift in mindset where in the former account, "Tacitus still has confidence in the goodness and validity of Roman rule, while in the *Annals*...his pessimism undermines even his trust in the legitimacy and capability of Rome's administration over the barbarians."³⁴ The accounts are different, because Tacitus' opinion evolved in the time between the writing of the two speeches. If Tacitus' position on empire did metamorphose, then the joint reading of the two barbarian speeches is more logical. Tacitus' growing pessimism explains why he used and needed the speech of Boudicca to develop themes from Calgacus' speech. The speech of Boudicca, written after that of Calgacus, and reflecting Tacitus' evolved opinion, helps develop Tacitus' unified attempt at an imperial critique.

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32 Paratore (2012) 181.

33 Ibid., 183-184.

34 Ibid., 183.

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