18. M. Coffey, *op. cit.*, p. 102: ‘The theme of the pretentious and contemptible verse-making of Persius’ contemporaries in contrast to his own modest satire is a foretaste of a main theme of Satire 1; much of what is expressed with brevity and allusiveness in the prologue is expanded in the poem that follows.’

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A NOTE ON TACITUS, ANNALS I, 13, 2-3

F.R.D. Goodyear, commenting on the inclusion of the anecdote about the ‘supremi sermones’ of Augustus in Tacitus’ account of the debate in the senate on 17th September A.D. 14, says that, while the story is appropriate at this point in the narrative, it could also have been introduced at 1, 4 or 1, 2. He concludes that Tacitus was led to introduce the anecdote at this point because both Gallus and Arruntius, whose contributions to the debate the historian has just mentioned, figure in one version of the ‘supremi sermones’.

However, given Tacitus’ selectivity in his choice and arrangement of material, one ought to expect that he had more cogent reasons than this for introducing the anecdote into his narrative at this point; in fact, careful analysis of the context reveals that the story of the ‘supremi sermones’ has a vital role to play and could not have been introduced as appropriately at other points in the narrative.

At *Annals* I, 12 Tacitus recounts Gallus’ contribution to the debate. He shows that Gallus offended Tiberius by taking what Tiberius said at face-value, instead of playing the emperor’s hypocritical game.\(^2\) Thus, when Tiberius offered to undertake part of the administration, Gallus asked what part the emperor wanted and gave great offence.\(^1\)

When Tiberius replied that he could not choose since he would prefer to be excused from the administration altogether, Gallus realised that he had given offence and said that, in fact, the supreme power was indivisible and that this was what his question had been designed to show.\(^4\) Although this reply seemed to be exactly what the emperor wanted to hear, and although Gallus made his drift clearer by adding praise of Augustus and reminding Tiberius of how eminently suitable a person he, Tiberius, was to wield supreme power, Gallus was unable to mollify the emperor’s ‘ira’.\(^5\) This, Tacitus tells us,\(^6\) was due to the fact that Tiberius already hated Gallus because, having married Vipsania, Gallus ‘plus quam civilia agitaret’ and retained the ‘ferocia’ of his father, Asinius Pollio. In other words, Tiberius’ already existing suspicions of Gallus caused him to believe that Gallus had ulterior motives when he emphasized the indivisibility
of supreme power immediately after Tiberius had said that he preferred to be
excused from the administration altogether, and that Gallus, despite his praise
of Tiberius, thought himself to be a suitable candidate for the principate.

Arruntius spoke next, and his speech was very similar to that of Gallus i.e.
he also emphasized the indivisibility of supreme power. He also gave offence,
for he was a man who might easily aspire to the position of princeps. It is at this
point that Tacitus, in order to substantiate further Tiberius' suspicions about the
motives behind the contributions of Gallus and Arruntius to the debate, introduces
the story about the 'supremi sermones' of Augustus, in which the aged
emperor told Tiberius that Gallus was greedy for supreme power but incapable
of wielding it, while Arruntius was both greedy and capable. Honesty compels
the historian to admit that not all his sources agree that Arruntius was
mentioned—some record the name of Gnaeus Piso instead—but in any event,
Tiberius certainly was suspicious of Arruntius since he eventually got rid of him.

Thus it is clear that the story of the 'supremi sermones' has an important
explanatory role to play at this point in Tacitus' narrative and that to question
its appropriateness shows a lack of understanding of what the historian intends
to convey.

NOTES

Goodyear's text.
2. Tacitus, of course, adopts the view that Tiberius, throughout this debate, was hypocritically
pretending to be hesitant about assuming supreme power. For some views on what was actually
taking place cf. G. Kampff, Phoenix 17, 1963, 25-58 and B. Levick, Tiberius the Politician,
Thames and Hudson, 1976, 71 ff.
5. Ann. 1, 12, 3-4.
8. As noted by Kampff, art. cit. 37, Arruntius would not have repeated Gallus' original
question which had clearly given offence.
10. Further substantiation is certainly needed since, on the face of it, Gallus and Arruntius
were saying just what Tiberius, in Tacitus' opinion, wanted to hear.
12. Ann. 1, 13, 3. Tacitus' desire to establish the fact of Tiberius' suspicions of Arruntius is
also evident from the sweeping generalization of this comment, for Arruntius was apparently,
in fact, the victim of Macro (cf. Ann. 6, 47).

LOIS DU TOIT

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