WHAT'S IN A NAME? TACITUS ON AUGUSTUS

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that the title ‘Augustus’ as used by Tacitus is implicitly associated with the growing despotism introduced after Actium, that Tacitus took this term to represent or to imply the whole process by which the Republic was finally destroyed and the Empire came into being. It further maintains that Tacitus makes his reservations about the new political order vested in the emperor clear by carefully and consistently crafting circumstances of doubt to surround the use of the title Augustus. This focus on individual power is identified by Tacitus as one of the fundamental changes introduced by Augustus after taking political control. An analysis of how Tacitus uses the reference to ‘Augustus’ gives some indication of his assessment of the new dispensation. Tacitus subsequently expects the reader to test this subversive construct against the raison d’être for the Empire, namely the establishment of a lasting peace, or failure thereof.

For Tacitus the historian, concentrating the government in the hands of a single human being exemplified the most basic difference between the Republic and the new order that took shape after Actium.1 The period after Actium coincided with the consolidation of Octavian’s personal influence in the state and his ‘development’ into the emperor Augustus.2 This paper proposes that it is feasible that Tacitus would have made the connection between this special title Octavian claimed for himself after Actium and the subsequent unwelcome long-term consequences for the Roman state.3 It

1 Hist. 1.1: postquam bellatum apud Actium atque omne potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit (‘After the battle at Actium had been fought, and it was in the interests of peace to concentrate all power in one man …’).
2 According to Keitel 1984:306 ‘[Tacitus] ... was generally hostile toward Augustus, and was even ambiguous or negative about the much-praised pax Augusta.’ Cf. also Willrich 1927 who discusses Tacitus linking Augustus with the growing lack of liberty in the Roman State.
3 Cf. Quinn 1963:113, who points out that ‘in any piece of writing where the act of writing is not mere drudgery expended on a mass of facts presenting no problems of communication, a constant process of interaction takes place between ‘form’ and ‘content.’ Woodman 1988:80 sums this process up in a masterly fashion when he
suggests that Tacitus took the term Augustus to represent or to imply the whole process by which the Republic was finally destroyed and the Empire came into being.\(^4\) It further maintains that Tacitus makes his reservations about the new political order clear by carefully and consistently crafting circumstances of doubt to surround the use of the title Augustus.\(^5\) Tacitus subsequently expects the reader to test this subversive construct against the raison d'\^{e}tre for the Empire, namely the establishment of a lasting peace.\(^6\) An analysis of how Tacitus used the reference to 'Augustus' should therefore give some indication of his assessment of the new order of things.\(^7\)

Originally the title 'Augustus' identified the holder of legitimate divine power.\(^8\) Looking back on the founding of the Empire, Tacitus, however,
implies that the title Augustus is implicitly associated with the growing despotism introduced after Actium.\(^9\) What is striking is how ambiguously Tacitus employs the title Augustus long before he writes the \emph{ab excessu divi Augusti annales}.\(^{10}\)

In one of his earliest works, the \emph{Dialogus}, Tacitus refers to the title Augustus eight times. In each case the circumstances are ambiguous or, at the least, suggestive.\(^{11}\) In each case the deterioration of rhetoric forms a \emph{basso continuo} suggesting general deterioration in the larger political environment or the State. Such implicit political commentary in a work supposedly dedicated to arguing the merits of poetry above that of rhetoric invites the reader to pick up on the suggested criticism.

In sections 11-13 of the \emph{Dialogus} the life of the poet is contrasted directly with that of the orator to illustrate the deterioration of oratory in the Empire and the subsequent regression of the status and function of rhetoricians – and by implication of robust, free speech. It is only when this deterioration is firmly established in the minds of the hearers that Tacitus refers to the title ‘Augustus’ at all. He refers to Augustus three times in short succession, but always in terms of the poet Virgil. He mentions that Virgil did not lack the favour of the deified emperor ([Virgil] \emph{neque apud divum Augustum gratia caruit, 13.1.5}), that Augustus’s own letters (\emph{testes Augusti epistulae, 13.2.1}) testified to Virgil’s favour and that the citizens honoured the poet as if they were honouring the emperor Augustus (\emph{populius ... Vergilium veneratus est sic quasi Augustum, 13.3.1}). The references to Augustus seem to be used only to enhance the praise of the poet, not the other way around. The reader is led to wonder in what way Augustus and Virgil may be connected. It takes but a

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\(^9\) Cf. Brown 1992:7: ‘The reader should labor under no illusion. Power, not persuasion, remains the most striking characteristic of the later Roman Empire in all its regions.’ This focus on power as opposed to the persuasive qualities of rhetoric is identified by Tacitus as one of the fundamental changes introduced by Augustus after taking political control at Actium. This does not mean that Tacitus does not accept that peace after Actium was greeted with heartfelt relief (\emph{Ann. 1.2.1}).

\(^{10}\) Since the exact dating of Tacitus’s \emph{oeuvre} is undecided, I accept the traditional view that Tacitus held out until 97AD before he published any of his work; that the dates of composition are unclear; and finally, that there seems to be consensus that the \emph{Agricola} was published first, followed by the \emph{Germania}, the \emph{Dialogus} and then the \emph{Historiae} and finally the \emph{Annales}.

\(^{11}\) Cf. Leake 1987:272, who refers to the \emph{Dialogus} as ‘Tacitus’ most audacious work.’ He goes on to point out that the basic question discussed in the work is not to give ‘a hint of a radical critique of politics, but it does suggest a possible critique of the Principate’ (273). And the Principate started with the emperor Augustus.
small step further to acknowledge that if Virgil represents poetry Augustus, by implication, must be associated with rhetoric. Given the context of the basic choice of the Dialogus, that of poetry over rhetoric, it seems as if Tacitus, in his eloquent support for Virgil, is expressing his preference for poetry as opposed to the debased activity that rhetoric has become under the new political system.12 The title ‘Augustus’ is thus implicitly linked to this negative assessment.

It is striking, too, that the following four references to Augustus in Dialogus 17 are all unceasingly negative, associating Augustus over and over with the deterioration of oratory. The first reference quite ominously pinpoints the death of Cicero, staunch republican and that most famous of Roman orators, as taking place in the year when Augustus established himself and his henchman Pedius as replacements for the existing consuls, Pansa and Hirtius13 (quo anno divus Augustus in locum Pansa et Hirtii se et Q. Pedium consules suffecit, Dial. 17.2.4).14 This idiosyncratic juxtaposition of events suggests that there is a clear (causal) connection between Cicero, the epitome of free speech and oratory, dying in the year when autocracy is established successfully.15 In addition, the next reference in the Dialogus spells out the number of years (fifty-six) that Augustus reigned (rexit) — a situation which explicitly marked the end of the Republic and which started to hamper the effectiveness of oratory (Dial. 17.3.2).16 The length of Augustus’s reign supports the meaning of rexit. The implication is that if a whole life-time is passed under the sway of an autocrat not many people are left who still remember the power of choice or the impact of free speech.

The final three references to Augustus in the Dialogus 17.6.2, 17.7.3 and

12 Cf. Dominik 2003:140-44 for a sustained discussion of the context. See also Dominik 1993:10 on Tacitus’s audience at this time, an audience ‘possessing at least a reasonable measure of academic learning, literary astuteness and aesthetic sensibility (cf. Tac. Dial. 19), [who] would have expected a writer to adapt earlier literary themes and motifs to serve a new purpose . . . ’

13 Cf. Daitz 1960:37, who sums up as follows: ‘An important variation in the process of direct description is found in the author’s recounting some of the actions of the characters. These actions, in addition to their historical significance, are often highly indicative of personality and are inevitably one of the prime bases on which the reader formulates his opinion of the character.’

14 Keitel 1984:313 points out that Tacitus refers to the use of force not only against the consuls (i.a. against Pansa) but against the state itself (contra rem publicam, 1.10.2).

15 This causal connection has been carefully prepared in the previous references to Augustus under ambiguous circumstances in the Dialogus.

16 Cf. Dial. 17.3.2: status sex et quinquaginta annos, quibus max divus Augustus rem publicam rexit (‘add to that the fifty-six years in which the deified Augustus reigned over the state’). To ‘reign’ [rexit] a state underlines the autocracy of the ruler.
28.6.4 are seemingly incidental, but each has a sting in the tail. The *congiarium* distributed under Augustus (*a divo ... Augusto semel atque iterum accepisse congiarium*, Dial. 17.6.2) may have been perfectly above board, but the implication is clear that popular support in the time of Augustus could, or even had to, be bought. The repeated emphasis on the duration of Augustus’s reign (*nam Corvinus in medium usque Augusti principatum, Asinius paene ad extremum duravit*, Dial. 17.7.3) again emphasises the concomitant lack of remembrance of any previous alternatives. Messalla, in extolling Roman personal involvement in the education of their young (*... sie Aliam Augusti praefuisse educationibus ac productisse principes liberos accepimus*, Dial. 28.6.4) cites the Gracchi, Caesar and Augustus as examples of the results of this personal involvement. These four men probably did more than most others to destabilise the Republic and set up the new order. A list of such ambiguous examples is highly suggestive. At the end of the *Dialogus* the reader may have heard arguments for and against rhetoric and poetry. The astute reader has also deduced some of Tacitus’s main concerns regarding the new order and the man bearing the title ‘Augustus’.

This concern with how things are deteriorating, in spite of good men doing their utmost to fight this, is the main thrust of Tacitus’s *Agricola*. This work highlights the ambiguity inherent in a thrust towards the general good versus a striving for individual power. Even though Augustus is mentioned only once, he is implicated as the first individual who obfuscated the individual's position *vis-a-vis* the State. The very title ‘Augustus’ is shown to have developed symbolic value at this time. According to Tacitus, Britain had been forgotten rather than managed before Agricola’s arrival. This situation was handled by the first two emperors according to their own personal inclination, implying that the emperors went about managing such a remote part of the Empire rather haphazardly, ignoring the immense effort that went into the initial conquest of the place. According to Tacitus, Augustus justified forgetting about Britain by calling this omission a strategy. Tacitus goes further by suggesting that Augustus must have needed an excuse for this oversight. Tiberius continued this negligent attitude using the same excuse (not focusing on Britain as ‘strategy’), but in turn justified the excuse by calling it an example (*consilium id divus Augustus vocabat, Tiberius praecipitum, Agricola 13.3.3*). The two emperors’ reading of the situation in Britain is used by Tacitus as an opportunity to characterise both negatively – as if they

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17 This paper does not allow for the detailed analysis of the *Dialogus* as Tacitean writing which would further back up this reading.

18 Walker 1976:113 pithily sums up Tacitus’s basic perspective on his subject matter as follows: ‘History is seen as a process of decay.’
needed to represent their negligence as something different. By making this connection between strategy (consilium), that is no strategy, and action that dwindles into an example (praeceptum), Tacitus underlines the ongoing negative effect of the exercise of individual unlimited power. It seems as if the emperors are interchangeable once they have all power in hand. Tacitus points out the inappropriateness of this power when vested in an individual who could be plagued by forgetfulness or guided by uninformed precedent. By specifying 'divus Augustus', instead of simply calling the emperor princeps, for instance, Tacitus focuses on the incongruity between the all-encompassing power of the individual and his offhandedness\(^\text{19}\) or even his human fallibility in fulfilling his office. The ‘happy auspices’ originally associated with the title ‘Augustus’ have been eroded most thoroughly.

This is a clear indication of things to come in both the Annales and the Historiae.\(^\text{20}\) Even when Augustus is mentioned as a person, by referring to him by his title ‘Augustus’, the historian pushes the individual aside and focuses on the power embodied by the individual and associated with the title.\(^\text{21}\) Over time and with repetition it becomes clear that Tacitus uses the title ‘Augustus’ to indicate a discrepancy between the fallible actions of the man and the divine power, originally associated with this title, of a legitimate leader initiating ‘any enterprise under happy auspices’.\(^\text{22}\) In the Annales the loaded or ambivalent use of the title Augustus is so consistent that it hardly needs a detailed analysis to be conclusive. The title itself \textit{ab excessu divi Augusti Annales} is ambivalently explained in the first chapter: that enough great minds were still around to give an account of the initial period of government under Augustus, but that subsequently growing sycophancy (\textit{gliscente adulatione}, Ann. 1.1.10) prevented proper reporting.\(^\text{23}\) This clearly implies that sycophancy needed the foothold supplied by Augustus’s manipulation of the original Republican offices. The very first description of

\(^{19}\) In a modern context this would be called lack of accountability.

\(^{20}\) I shall focus on the Annales first, although it was published after the Historiae. I shall group references in these works together, since the immediate circumstances in which the title ‘Augustus’ is cited may change, but the effect remains remarkably consistent.

\(^{21}\) ‘Political power and legitimacy rest not only in taxes and armies, but also in the perceptions and beliefs of men ... Their truth or untruth is only a secondary problem’ (Hopkins 1978:198).

\(^{22}\) See note 8.

\(^{23}\) The consistent implication is that with a single man in authority only a single man needs to be influenced. The use as well as the effectiveness of unbridled flattery therefore increases. A different political system might not reward flattery to the same degree.

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Augustus is negative: it is implied that he, as princeps, could found an empire only because its peoples were exhausted by civil war ([Augustus] qui cuncta discordiis civilibus fossa nomine principis sub imperium acceptit, 1.1.6). Tacitus indicates further that he would concentrate only on the 'too little too late' (panca de Augusto et extrema, 1.1.14) at the end of Augustus's reign before reporting the unmitigated disasters under Tiberius and his successors. The sine ira et studio with which he aims to do his reporting is probably one of the most cynical comments in the whole of the Annales, implying as it does that the actions contained in his work will speak for themselves, without benefit of embellishment or bias on the part of the author. This phrase, too, gains in dramatic irony as the work unfolds.

According to Tacitus's description of events in the Annales, Augustus's power may have been legitimate initially. It may even have been a divine power as originally embodied in the title Augustus. This legitimate power, however, is quickly compromised by becoming embroiled in the trappings of inordinate individual political power. At the end of his life Augustus has successfully consolidated all power in himself. One of the most important requirements for absolute political power is the need for such power to continue unabated. If power cannot guarantee its own continuation, its effectiveness is undermined in the most fundamental way. Right at the beginning of the Annales (Ann. 1.3.1) therefore, the connection is made between absolute power and its need for continuation.

Augustus tries to consolidate his power by determining who succeeds him. The interesting point is that Augustus is legitimately concerned with

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24 Tacitus uses the same type of sentence structure that Horace used so frequently and to such good effect: the subject of the sentence (qui) is set apart from the action it generates (nomine principis, sub imperium acceptit) and from the object of that action (cuncta) by the most important section of the sentence: the motivation for the action (discordiis civilibus fossae).
25 Cf. note 8 above.
26 Cf. Syme's masterly summing up of what Tacitus does in the Annales: 'With full freedom to choose and arrange, the author unobtrusively suggests lessons of conduct, paradoxes of survival, the gap between the past and present' (1958:313).
27 Keitel 1984:312 sums up as follows: '... in these chapters [the beginning of the Annales] the historian suggests that the principate, contrary to the appearances it wishes to present, is a hereditary monarchy founded on deception and violence.' For 'principate' read 'Augustus' and for 'monarchy' read 'monarch of a hereditary monarchy', since from the outset the wishes of the principate are the wishes of Augustus.
28 Cf. Ann. 1.3.1: Augustus subsidia dominationi ... Claudium Marcellum ... extulit ('Augustus educated ... Claudius Marcellus with a view to support his domination').
the education and development of Marcellus, but by means of the interpolation of *subsidia dominationi* (*Ann.* 1.3.1) between Augustus and the object of his attention (Marcellus), Tacitus suggests a self-centred and even nefarious motivation for Augustus's action. In suggesting that Augustus's action is motivated directly by the desire to maintain his own power (*subsidia dominationi*), an unhealthy concern with the succession is spelled out. In this way Tacitus emphasises Augustus's preoccupation with power and his own autocracy. The reader is led to question the legitimacy of a power that needs to guarantee its own continuation at all cost. Augustus may have started his period of government with legitimate powers. The description at the end of his reign suggests quite clearly, though, that his obsession with power has morphed into something quite illegitimate.

Tacitus does not hesitate to point out a concomitant problem associated with Augustus's own obsession with power. At this stage the obsession with power is not only all-consuming (and therefore bordering on the illegitimate), but more worryingly, according to Tacitus, it does not end with the ostensible ruler of the world. The emperor himself is in the power of his wife, Livia (*Ann.* 3.1.8). The implication that the most powerful man in the Roman Empire is himself under the absolute control of a woman illustrates in graphic detail the most basic problem of an autocracy. The constant vulnerability of a single ruler to being manipulated, and manipulated not by counsellors or some official (state) body, but by some other unspecified individual, must represent one of Tacitus's most fundamental objections to the autocratic system of government instituted under the Empire. Given

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29 The reader is also reminded of the fundamental difference between the founding of a dynasty and the annual choice of two new consuls under the Republic.
30 Boesche 1987:189 maintains that 'the best political analysis of despotism' was offered by the historian Tacitus. I would like to suggest that Tacitus's manipulation of the meaning of the title 'Augustus', by placing it so consistently in a negative context, illustrates this growing despotism.
31 His scathing attack on the *mathematics* (*Hist.* 1.22), where he sums up their influence on the state, is a case in point (*genus hominum potentibus infidum, sperantibus fallax, quod in civitate nostra et vetabitur semper et retenetur* ('A tribe of persons treacherous to those in power, undermining those who are ambitious, a tribe which – in our state – will always be both outlawed and retained'). This perspective gains ground in the next chapter when it becomes clear that popular compliance with the dictatorship would continue only while Augustus himself guaranteed its benevolence. Cf. *Ann.* 1.4.2 *omnia... inna principis aspactare, nulla in praesenti formidine, dum Augustus aetate validius seque et domum et pacem sustentavit* ('All eyes were on the emperor, with no immediate concern, while Augustus was still in good health and able to keep himself, his household and the peace going'). Peace dependent on one man's survival (and his ability to keep his own house in order) is a fragile peace indeed.
this loaded introduction to the drama, with all the seeds for disaster so carefully sown, the climax and dénouement in the following chapters run like clockwork. Augustus’s health takes a turn for the worst. This affects the succession and, since the power of the dynasty depends on succession, the general consequences as well as the reaction to Augustus’s death are carefully manipulated – in the senate (Ann. 1.6.7) as well as in public (Ann. 1.5.1, 3, 13 and 17) – by the next in line, Tiberius.32 Tacitus puts the final wry comment – on Augustus’s entire achievement as well as on the establishment of the Empire – in the mouths of ordinary people: that the founder of the Empire, the Emperor Augustus, naturally (scilicet) needed military protection for a peaceful burial.33 Limitless power – it is clear – can only be maintained with military backup. What this implies about power, is dishearteningly suggestive. Augustus’s long and sustained effort to base his power, at least on the perception of legitimacy, is reduced to ashes. The reality of the autocracy of the system (as embodied in the title of its ruler) is quite clear.34

The final test for the success of the Empire is whether it answered to the aims and fulfilled the requirements which motivated its initial founding. The chapters following Augustus’s death, and Tiberius’s tightening of the reins of complete authority, set the stage for a chilling account of the final dissolution of the Republic in the rest of the Annales. It is striking that the idea of civil war and a problematic peace, which in the Historiae functions as an extended metaphor of the consequences of the establishment of the Empire, is brought into play quite early on in the Annales as well. The Empire comes about when the needs of the collective citizenry or the State (necessitudine rei publicae, Ann. 1.9.11) supersede the need for laws (Ann. 1.9.12). The implication is that where the necessity for laws is acknowledged, the law can guarantee equity for the citizen body. When some other construct’s needs are put before that of the legal framework of the State, equity for all citizens is no longer possible. Even the immediate demand for peace cannot be more important than the real (not the pretended) maintenance of the law. In a time of war, it is because of the general suspension of the law that the citizen, as opposed to the soldier, suffers most. In underlining the overruling demands for peace, Tacitus suggests that other needs were sidelined. This desire for

32 ‘The pattern of violence and deception of Augustus’ career recurs as Tiberius takes power’ (Keitel 1984:315).
33 Cf. Ann. 1.8.24: auctio scilicet militari tuendum, ut sepultura eius quiescet (‘the emperor as a matter of course, needed military support for a peaceful burial’).
34 Cf Benario 1964:97, who discusses Tacitus’s manipulation of general political vocabulary in order to reflect his changing views of the principate.
35 Cf. Ann. 1.9.12: rei publicae in qua nihis tunc legibus locus (‘the state in which there was then no room for law’).
peace after years of strife in the State originally supported the agreement to unify power in one man. In fact the desire for peace – apparently only attainable by the efforts of a single ruler – was felt by all and achieving it at all cost was supported by all. This may have been quite praiseworthy at the time. Tacitus, however, suggests that Augustus’s own desire for power (cupidim dominandi, Ann. 1.10.3), and not only a general desire for peace, brought about the founding of the Empire. Ironically, civil war was the means (ad arma civilia actum, Ann. 1.9.13) by which a so-called peace was eventually attained. This peace was a savage peace, obtained at a cost that only became clear under subsequent emperors. This was not the type of peace originally envisaged or desired. The Empire did finally achieve the desired peace, but in admitting this fact Tacitus grudgingly postpones the crucial qualifier of this peace (bloody, cruentam, Ann. 1.10.21) until the end of the phrase to give it the necessary impact as a negative value judgement reflecting on the very essence of a ‘bloody’ Empire. In short, according to Tacitus, the Empire did not justify its raison d'etre to bring into being a true pax romana for all its citizens. Furthermore, the basic stumbling block was the desire for personal power so neatly disguised by the ostensibly beneficent title for the wielder of this power, ‘Augustus’.

In the Historiae the cumulative effect of the ironic repetition of citing the emperor Augustus as precedent, not for successful or admirable procedures, but rather for failure on an organisational as well as on a human level, manages to undermine any good opinion the reader may have had of the

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36 The juxtaposition between Actium and an autocracy in Hist. 1.1 (postquam bellatum apud Actium atque omnem potentiam ad unum conferi pacis interiit) suggests the interdependence of the fighting and its result. In short, without the culmination of these years of civil wars, omnem potentiam ad unum would have been unthinkable. Cf. also note 5.

37 The erosion of the basic equality (aequalitas) of its citizens on which the well-being of the entire state depended is, according to Tacitus, undermined fundamentally by the single-minded pursuit of Augustus (and subsequent emperors) to obtain power (cupidine potentiae, Hist. 2.38.1) and to dominate (cupidine dominandi, Ann. 1.10.3).

38 Cf. Ann. 1.10.21: pacem sine dubio post bœc, verum cruentum (‘afterwards there had been peace without any doubt, but a bloody peace indeed’).

39 Cf Martin 1969:121, who argues that ‘in view of the importance accorded by the Romans to the concept of nos maiorum, it is not surprising that their historians too should work within an established tradition’ and that Tacitus should exploit this tradition. In consistently referring to the larger Roman historical stage, Tacitus implicitly keeps comparisons to a previous (more state-orientated) period before his reader. This context does not reflect positively on the bearer of the title ‘Augustus’. Whether these comparisons are valid or not, the point is that a focus on the well-being of the res publica has been exchanged for the aim of keeping one man in power.
emperor or for that matter of the system which is subsumed in his title. I will mention only a few incidents as obvious examples.

As can be expected, all the references in the Historiae are in terms of Augustus as precedent for later rulers. Egypt was under Augustus’s direct control like a piece of land controlled by kings (a divo Augusto equites Romani obtinent [Aegyptum] loco regum, Hist. 1.11.2). There is no need to add loco regum to the sentence for clarity of communication. There is every need if negative innuendo is the aim. Egypt may represent a country with special circumstances, but the link between Augustus and a reference to that Roman aversion ‘kings’ is quite clear. The fact that Augustus and (Egyptian) kings are juxtaposed so directly implies that there is little choice between the Roman ruler and those frighteningly autocratic Egyptian (Eastern) monarchs.

The year of the four emperors supplies a plethora of negative Augustan examples. Galba repeatedly citing Augustus’s (originally a desperate last-ditch) adoption of his step-son Tiberius as precedent for his own adoption of Piso manages to imply – by citing this very example – that Piso’s adoption would give raise to equally unfavourable circumstances. It suggests quite clearly that this adoption, like Augustus’s adoption of Tiberius, must have had in mind the preservation of power at all cost. This undermines any reasonably straightforward or positive intentions that Galba may have had with the adoption.

According to Tacitus, Otho received the tribunicia potestas and the title of Augustus on a day passed in crime (exceto per scelera die ... decernitur Othoni tribunicia potestas et nomen Augusti, Hist. 1.47.4). Tacitus thus subtly links the specific, explicit crimes of the day with the office and power held by a leader called by the title ‘Augustus’. The implication is that Otho would continue such crimes according to the precedent set by those who bore the title before him.

All along Tacitus blames the Roman people for not understanding the consequences of their own and others’ actions. When confronted by a choice between Otho and Vitellius, the people of the empire suffering the evils of war (populus sentire paulatim belli mala, Hist. 1.89.3) choose, ostensibly, for peace, instead of understanding that there is no possibility for peace since

40 Cf Ash 1998:38, who points out that ‘Tacitus’ readers were likely to have been primed to make connections between past and present events.
41 It would be too much to read a direct suggestion to the return to the time of the ‘kings’ in this reference, but the subliminal implication is there.
42 exemplo divi Augusti qui ... Tiberium Neronem privignum in proximo sibifastigio colloavit (Hist. 1.15.9); sed Augustus in domo successorem quasivit ... (Hist. 1.15.12); adoptari a se Pisonem, exemplo divi Augusti ... pronuntiat (Hist. 1.18.7). Piso indeed is killed very soon after Galba.
there is no real difference between the two leaders. This is the same mistake made ever since the time of Augustus where the choice for peace was subsumed in the choice for the glory of a single man (nam ex quo divus Augustus res Caesarum compositit, procul et in unius sollicitudinem aut deus populus Romanus bellaverat, Hist. 1.89.6).

Not only Augustus, but also Julius Caesar was a sterling example of this situation, namely, actions taken not for the benefit of the state in the first place, but for the glory of a single man. Tacitus points out that the Empire managed to survive a Julius Caesar as well as an Augustus (mansisse C. Julio, mansisse Caesare Augusto victore imperium, Hist. 1.50.15). 'Survival' is normally the aim of a state in a desperate war against an external enemy (for instance against a general like Hannibal). That it could be an achievement for a state to 'survive' its own leaders reflects very seriously on the destructive effect of those leaders. They are as bad as any previous enemy of the Roman people. It is suggestive that Tacitus should link Julius Caesar and Augustus so directly. By pointing out that the State survived both these men, Tacitus forces the reader to remember why Caesar was removed initially – only to be replaced by a more successful autocrat in the end.43

The final condemnatory reference to Augustus the man, and the implications associated with his title, occurs in the final chapter of Historiae, Book 1. The populace supports the leader of the moment just as they had supported Caesar and Augustus, not out of fear or love, but, like slaves, out of a passion for servitude (... dictatorem Caesarem aut imperatorem Augustum prosequerentur ... nec metu aut amore, sed ex libidine serviti ..., Hist. 1.90.16). Tacitus seems to suggest that when individual responsibility for the State started to be undermined, the unity of action originally required by the res publica changed into a passion for servility towards the leader, instead of service to the State. Since they accepted this situation, the people ended up with the leaders and the 'bloody' peace they deserved.

Finally, the basic value of the title 'Augustus' is brought into complete discredit in its last appearance in Historiae Book 2, when Vitellius is hailed as 'Augustus' by a crowd that embodies complete lack of moral, as well as intellectual, discrimination (vulgus tamen vacuum curis et sine falsi verique discrimine, 2.90.7). Vitellius himself is forced to take the title of Augustus against his own will (abnuenti nomen Augusti expressere ut adsumerat, tam frustra quam recusaverat, 2.90.8). When Vitellius's future hangs in the balance, Vespasian's decision to make an end to him is clinically supported by two simple statements: Caesar would not have allowed Pompey to live, nor did Augustus

43 It does not matter that Augustus originally took up his manoeuvering for the leadership position as legitimate heir to Caesar.
spare Anthony (non a Caesare Pompeium, non ab Augusto Antonium incolumes relicios, Hist. 3.66.16). The implication is clear: for a ruler of the Roman Empire, clemency towards a Roman citizen and incidental rival is not an option – in striking contrast to the relative clemency the Romans extended to their so-called foreign conquests.

In the Historiae the cumulative effect of this ironic repetition of citing Augustus as precedent, not for successful or admirable procedure, but rather for failure on an organisational as well as on a human level, manages to undermine any good opinion the reader may have had of the emperor or for that matter of the system which he represented.44

In all the above references to ‘Augustus’ it could be argued that the title is used to convey factual information for which the word is perfectly appropriate. My counter-argument would be that finding the title so consistently imbedded in a negative context adds an unexpected deictic dimension to the meaning of ‘Augustus’ that one does not necessarily associate with a historiographic text.

Before concluding, I would like to consider Tacitus’s portrayal of peace – that single justification for the Empire and one of Tacitus’s basic criteria for statehood – to see if this condition supports the negative use of the title ‘Augustus’, one of the most significant titles associated with the Empire. Tacitus, after all, calls the results of Empire not peace but devastation (ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant, Agricola 30).45

In the first book of the Annales there are eight references to peace and nearly all of them ambivalent. It seems as if Tacitus repeatedly wants to remind his readers of the reasons for the establishment of the Empire in the first place. He points to obvious and ostensibly casual incidents to encourage discomfort in his reader. If Augustus’s peace depended on control over his own household (Ann. 1.4.4), then this was a fragile peace indeed. The reader is confronted by the fragility of peace for the citizenry if that peace is reflected in the shaky relationship between Augustus and his household.

Further reminders of the ambivalence of peace abound. Pompey was originally betrayed by the pretence of peace (imagine pacis, Ann. 1.10.18). The peace after the civil war was a bloody peace (pacem ... cruentam, Ann. 1.10.22).

44 Develin 1983:95 emphasises that ‘the way he [Tacitus] presented the ‘evidence’ is his responsibility.’ This implies that the reader, too, should be particularly sensitive to how the evidence is presented.

45 It is important to remember that the quote is preceded by a list specifying the ‘normal’ actions associated with the establishment of an empire: aferre, tradisce, rapere, falsis nominibus imperium atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant, Agr. 30). Any right-minded person would have very serious doubts about the advantages of peace established by such means.
Soldiers found no advantage or gain in a sterile peace (sterilem pacem, Ann. 1.17.17) which brought them no material advantage. Soldiers dared in peace what they did not dare in war (Ann. 1.19.7), implying that in war at least some discipline was still maintained. Soldiers, finally, had to be reconciled with peace (Ann. 1.46.13), since there was so little difference between peace and war, that there was no obvious advantage in striving for peace. A lethargic peace (pax ... languida, Ann. 1.50.16) was desirable in an enemy since Rome could no longer accommodate (and administer) productive and energetic new conquests. And eventually, all things considered, peace is better than war (Ann. 1.58.7) — not a very positive summary of the commodity for which the res publica sacrificed its autonomy, and for which it accepted to have power vested in a single individual, as Tacitus put it at the beginning of the Historiae (omnia potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit, Hist. 1.1). In the entire book (Annales 1) only Celina gives some indication of what a real peace should consist of. He implies that peace is the prerequisite for proper ethical judgement, and that war suspends the difference between good and evil (nam in pace causas et merita spectari ubi bellum ingravit innocentis ac noxios inucta cadere, Ann. 1.48.8). Ironically, this definition of peace is given for the most utilitarian of purposes: to a group of mutineers to enable them to avoid having to suffer the revenge of high command awaiting them in the person of Germanicus (parata in defectores utriusque, Ann. 1.48.2).

In Annales 2 and 3 peace is consistently depicted as something ambivalent. It is the result of some or other machination (Ann. 2.26.13) or the result of superior craftiness (pacem sapientia firmaverat, Ann. 2.64.5). A bloodless peace offers the only alternative to an uncompromising war (pacem incertam vs. bellum integrum, Ann. 2.46.12). Peace is a condition put at risk by the mere presence of women in the provinces or in foreign countries (inisse mulierum comitatui quae pacem luceat, bellum formidine moreantur, Ann. 3.33.8). Since an insolent villain like Tacfarinas should not be bought off by peace or a concession of land (Taifarinas pacem et concessione agrorum redimeret, Ann. 3.73.11), the reader is left with the impression that an offer of ‘peace’ could sometimes be used as an easy commodity to buy off more serious enemies of the State, nullifying any sacrifices previously made to achieve peace. Finally, peace is something that Augustus could afford only after his own position had been consolidated by war (potentiae securus ... iure quis pace et principe uteremur, Ann. 3.28.8). This reference to the laws required to uphold the unity of pace-et-principe suggests that the price of peace was the establishment of an

46 The disjunction of the qualifiers integrum (with war) and crementum (with peace) underlines the extent to which the difference in meaning between these concepts has been eroded.
empire. Ironically, war is to be preferred to a miserable peace under Tiberius  
(miseram pacem vel bello bene mutari, Ann. 3.44.10) since, in war at least, there  
was no pretence to be something that it was not. In other words, real peace,  
for which such a high price was paid originally, never materialised.

At the beginning of Annales 4 the reader is reminded in quick succession  
of the demise of Germanicus, the last possible safeguard of republican  
values; of Sejanus, the new and intractable influence in the Empire; and of  
fate that inevitably brings about change. In this section Tiberius now openly  
becomes tyrannical or allows others to be tyrannical on his behalf (cum repente  
turbare fortuna coepit, saevire ipse aut saevientibus viris praebere, Ann. 4.1.4). Under  
these circumstances peace, ironically, becomes the prerequisite for tyranny to  
flourish (immota quippe aut modice lacessita pax, Ann. 4.32.10). Peace could also  
generate lawlessness, as is illustrated in the case of the governor of Hispania  
Terraconensis, Lucius Piso, being killed by a local without much effort (is  
praetorem provinciae, L. Pisonem, pace incuriosum ... in mortem adefuit, Ann. 4.45.3).  
And peace could be violated because temptation, as well as the rewards of  
responding to temptation, become too great (pacem exuere, nostra magis avaritia  
quam oblique impatientes, Ann. 4.72.1). By the end of Annales 4, the negative  
connotations of peace have been firmly established. These negative perspec­ 
tives on peace work in consort to strengthen one fundamental idea, namely,  
that peace was not the sine qua non it might once have been before one man  
took power. The reason for the founding of the Empire was flawed. This  
basic flaw is epitomised in the title ‘Augustus’, the emperor who supposedly  
began the Empire ‘under happy auspices’, but who, in reality, founded  
something much more sinister.

Conclusion

The ancient historians, and their version of historical truth, have caused  
debate more often than not. Modern critics have tried to circumvent the  
problem by acknowledging that the ancient author was allowed much more  
creative scope in portraying content than a modern reader would tolerate  
from a contemporary historian. In this paper I have tried to point out that  
Tacitus’s loaded use of the title Augustus can be taken as a good indication  
of the expression of his discontent with the new order of things where so

47 See note 8.
48 Cf. Wiseman’s (1993:122) discussion of Seneca’s gross generalisations on  
historians as congenital liars.
47 See Bowsercock 1994, who investigates the complexities involved in ‘historical’ as  
opposed to ‘fictional’ truths.
much power was concentrated in the hands of one individual. However, Tacitus did not allow himself the amount of creative leeway that modern critics often assumed him to have taken. He did not pontificate on the malaise caused by the demise of the Republic.

Instead, he put an inordinate amount of effort into the language needed to support his basic premise: that to consolidate power in the hands of a single ruler would, and did have, disastrous results. He illustrated graphically and repeatedly how rhetorical power vested in the hands of a single man could control the portrayal of a historic situation, thereby illustrating how the political manipulation of the historic situation could just as successfully be controlled by a single man. In the superb manipulation of a simple title of office, he himself illustrated the effectiveness generated by a perfect mastery of rhetoric. Ironically, according to Tacitus, the title ‘Augustus’ came to suggest an equally manipulative control over the res publica.

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\[50\] Cf. Cameron 1989:5 who, in her excellent introduction to History as Text, concludes that ‘history-writing is not a simple matter of sorting out ... sources; it is inextricably embedded in a mesh of text.’

\[51\] ‘It remains the case nonetheless that if historical discourse is not connected — by as many intermediate links as one likes — to what may be called, for lack of a better term, reality, we may still be immersed in discourse, but such discourse would no longer be historical’ (Vidal-Naquet 1992:111).

\[52\] Classen 1988:115 points out that ‘through the very process of selection ... he [Tacitus] brings out most clearly the forces that determine the course of history.’ In this article I have tried to indicate that Tacitus chose to use the seemingly straightforward reference to ‘Augustus’ (as title or as designation of a specific emperor) in just such a way — to portray a negative force that determined the course of history.

\[53\] He also anticipated, as it were, the more recent debate on meaning generated by the self-referral of texts. Cf. Vernant’s summary: ‘... speech was the instrument most necessary for action and mastery of it gave you power over others’ (1983:295).
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