

BALMACEDA (C.) *Virtus Romana. Politics and Morality in the Roman Historians*. Pp. xiv + 297, ill. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Cased, US\$45. ISBN: 978-1-46963512-5.

This monograph, originally an Oxford doctoral thesis from 2005, is a comparative study of *virtus* in the Roman historians of the late Republic and early Empire: Sallust, Livy, Velleius Paterculus and Tacitus. Its aim is to show how the use of this central concept in the Roman value system evolved and reflected the changing political circumstances, and further, how ‘it helps us to understand the Roman’s conception of history more deeply’ (p. 8). The structure of the book is very clear-cut. The introduction deals briefly with the setting, focus and outline of the book. Chapter one, still in essence introductory, discusses the etymology and meaning of *virtus* in Rome. B. articulates (p. 45) that ‘[w]ords—especially political words—are not fixed realities, but on the contrary, usage determines meaning, and the continuous development of a concept was expressed in its redefinition and reinterpretation. The imprecision of Roman political terminology, which does not help us to find one consistent translation, demonstrates that we are dealing with a piece of “evolving vocabulary”’. No problem with this: B. comes very close to the cognitive semantics which stresses the contextual flexibility of meaning: the meaning emerges in context which narrows the semantic field of the word. However, it is baffling that she then makes—and sticks to—a very normative classification of *virtus*, proposing two meanings which she calls *virilis-virtus* (courage) and *humana-virtus* (virtue). This kind of classification results in the (to my mind non-existent) problem of overlapping of meanings (p. 32). Such observations as ‘there are some passages where it is very difficult to discern which kind of *virtus* the author is referring to’ (p. 33), and ‘[s]ometimes Cicero himself is deliberately ambiguous [i.e. in his use of *virtus*]’ (p. 37) reveal that the real problem lies with her classification of which the Roman authors were not aware. It is absurd to say e.g. that ‘characteristic of Velleius’ use of *virtus* in his historical narrative is the mixing of meanings between *virilis-virtus* or *virtus-courage* and *humana-virtus* or *virtus-virtue*’ (p. 134).

Chapters two to five are dedicated to the analysis of individual authors. The works of each author are treated separately. This is the most valuable section of the book. B. makes many interesting observations about the differing use of *virtus* in Latin historiography. She starts with Sallust whose historical works are about the failure of *virtus*. The destruction of Carthage had freed the Romans from the *metus hostilis* with the consequence that the nobility—and even the *homines novi*—lost the sense of serving the state; their *virtus* changed into the vices of leisure, avarice and desire for power which opened the road for political corruption and the decline of the Republic. The case of Livy is quite different: he offers *exempla* of *virtus* that belong to a distant past as lessons for the present situation. B. shows that in Livy ‘the Roman identity is closely connected first with the concept of *virtus* and then also with the concept of *libertas*’ (p. 84). In the early Republic, the constant struggles for the freedom of one’s own country gave the Romans opportunities for the acts of *virtus*. Indeed, one finds the word *virtus* almost 300 times in the extant books. However, B. makes the thought-provoking observation that the use diminishes with the progress of the narrative: while there are seventy-three instances in the first pentad, the last one has only fifteen (two books with no occurrences at all). The circumstances were clearly changing; it would be interesting indeed to know how Livy treated *virtus* in the lost part of his work.

Both Sallust and Livy associated the *virtus* with the Republic. With Velleius Paterculus we move to the Principate, although Velleius himself apparently did not see any dramatic change between the Republic and the reign of Augustus and Tiberius—to him (just like to Sallust) the real turning point in the Roman morals was the destruction of Carthage. Velleius expected the *virtus* (or *virtutes*—the plural form is rarely used by Livy and never by Sallust) of the *princeps* and the *novi* (as a *homo novus* himself he was naturally sympathetic with this group) to save the empire and re-establish the lost morals of the Republic. A substantial part of the chapter on Velleius is dedicated to the Tiberian narrative which appears different from the rest of his historical compendium. Its meaning is summed up by B.: ‘Tiberius represents not only the summit of Roman history but also the epitome of Roman *virtus*’ (p. 153).

Unlike Velleius, Tacitus saw a fundamental change from the Republic to the Empire that diminished Romans’ opportunities for showing courage or moral excellence. In his works, Tacitus offers examples of many good Romans, generals in particular, who are admired for their merits—but strikingly without the word *virtus* in their description (with only a handful of exceptions, first and foremost Tacitus’ father-in-law Agricola). According to B. ‘[t]here seems to be an expansion in the “virtuous vocabulary” which can be explained partly by the increase of the possible circumstances in which a Roman could find himself, especially during civil wars in the principate. It is striking, then, that they do not seem to deserve the word *virtus* in Tacitus’ view’ (p. 200). Thus, instead of using the word *virtus*, Tacitus uses such words as *moderatio* and *constantia*. According to B. ‘rather than actually replacing *virtus*, what these examples do is qualify the “mode” and even the “mood” of traditional *virtus*. *Constantia* and *moderatio* opposed *metus* and *adulatio*, and as such they were closely related to *virtus*, the customary courage and valor that had always been essential in Roman political life’ (p. 227). Her conclusion that Tacitus ‘challenges the traditional interpretation of *virtus*’ and ‘*virtus* does not change in the same way as politics, but its manifestations do’ (p. 240) left the present reviewer somewhat unsatisfied. Could it be after all that Tacitus did not use the word *virtus* in connection with the men deserving praise because he still took the word in its traditional republican sense—as is clearly demonstrated by the fact that he could link the word with the Germans who showed *virtus* in their fight for their *libertas*?

The book is clearly written although at times B. harps the same string too often. Once or twice I also found her reflections to be based on superficial reading. She writes, for instance, that ‘[Catiline] is so brave that Sallust cannot but admire his courage. He possesses the finest martial qualities of the Republic and his army exhibits the *virtus* proper of old times (*prisca virtus*)’ (p. 57f.). Whether or not Sallust’s description of Catiline includes admiration, is a matter of dispute; in my mind the mention that Catiline performed the duties of an active soldier and of a good general (*strenui militis et boni imperatoris officia simul exequabatur*) simply expresses Sallust’s approval, not admiration. As to the claimed *virtus* of his army, Sallust in fact attributes it to the veteran cohorts of Petreius’ and not to Catiline’s army. Only a few slip-ups caught my eye, most notable on page 18 where the Plato quotation in Greek is a sentence longer than the translation in the main text.