

Who can read Tacitus? Tacitean identities in Francis Bacon and Ben Jonson

Despite the belated start of wider reception of the works of Cornelius Tacitus in Early Modern England, by the beginning of the seventeenth century the readers of the Roman historian could truly witness the centre of political and intellectual discussion.

In this paper, I try to explore the ways in which two authors later considered key figures in the development of the Tacitist movement in England, positioned themselves in relation to the growing popularity of Tacitus. The base for this is an analysis of two selected short texts by Francis Bacon and Ben Jonson. The detailed analysis of the texts and deep reflection about the context of their creation serves as the illustration of the evolution of the reception of Tacitus and the place of the Tacitean writing in the English political debate of the period

In 1612 Ben Jonson published his *Epigrams*. One of the poems, titled *The New Cry*, depicts the self-proclaimed statesmen, looking for the plots and conspiracies. Among the formative lectures of such individuals, Jonson puts the “pocket Tacitus”, which is identified by Alan Bradford as the 1694 edition of Justus Lipsius’ *Politica*, but on the first level of reading it simply suggests the handy, accessible version of the historian’s thought.

In 1625 *Apophthegms New and Old* by Francis Bacon were published. Apophthegm 58 tells the story of the author himself discussing the case of John Hayward with Queen Elizabeth I. Bacon is said to reject Hayward’s *Life and Reign of King Henry IV* (1599) as plagiarism of Tacitus’ historical narratives.

Both Bacon and Jonson approach the topic of the reception of Tacitus with irony, distancing themselves from it. It is visible in the texts and suggested by the chosen literary genre. Yet the authors used Tacitus in their own writings, provided inspiration for the next generation of Tacitean readers and writers, and are listed as fundamental figures in the modern studies about English Tacitism. I believe that these two texts may be used for mapping the English Tacitism, its popularity and controversiality.