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0521660564 - Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus
Ellen O'Gorman
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IRONY AND MISREADING
IN THE *ANNALS* OF TACITUS

This book examines Tacitus' *Annals* as an ironic portrayal of Julio-Claudian Rome, through close analysis of passages in which characters engage in interpretation and misreading. By representing the misreading of signifying systems – such as speech, gesture, writing, social structures and natural phenomena – Tacitus obliquely comments upon the perversion of Rome's republican structure in the new principate. Furthermore, this study argues that the distinctively obscure style of the *Annals* is used by Tacitus to draw his reader into the ambiguities and compromises of the political regime it represents. The strain on language and meaning both portrayed and enacted by the *Annals* in this way gives voice to a form of political protest to which the reader must respond in the course of interpreting the narrative.

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To study adequately any breakdown in communications we must first understand the nature and structure of the particular mode of communication that has ceased to function . . . language in operation, language in drift, language in the nascent state, and language in dissolution.

Roman Jakobson

quid scribam . . . aut quo modo scribam aut quid omnino non scribam hoc tempore, di me deaque peius perdant quam perire me cotidie sentio, si scio.

Tiberius Caesar

Preface

The editions of Tacitus' works used throughout this work are: R. M. Ogilvie and I. Richmond, *Agricola*, Oxford 1967; H. Heubner, *Annals*, Stuttgart 1983; K. Wellesley, *Historiae*, Leipzig 1989. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

I have used the terms 'princeps' and 'emperor' interchangeably according to the rhythms of individual sentences rather than as precise analytical terms. Similarly (though perhaps less noticeably for the classicist reader) I have conflated 'Tacitus' and 'the narrator'.

This is a revised version of a PhD dissertation completed at the University of Bristol, Department of Classics and Ancient History, under the supervision of Catharine Edwards; the comments of my examiners, Charles Martindale and John Moles, and of the CUP readers contributed significantly to the transformation from thesis to book. Two years of graduate research were aided by a fees-only award from the British Academy; during this time I received further financial aid from the University Access Fund and held a teaching fellowship in the Department itself. I would also like to thank the University Alumni Foundation for funding attendance at overseas conferences. In the course of writing and rewriting I have benefited enormously from the intellectual engagement, careful reading, computer support, collegiality and friendship of many people: Duncan Barker, John Betts, Mark Buchan, Catriona Cannon, Louise Charkham, Ray Clare, Howard Duncan, Geoff Foote, Bob Fowler, Chris Hall, Debra Hershkowitz, Al Judge, Duncan Kennedy, Earl McQueen, Charles Martindale, Neville Morley, Lin Pountney, Christopher Rowe, Patrick Sinclair, Gideon Tearle, Neil Titman, Sharon Watson, Thomas Wiedemann, Phil Young and Vanda Zajko. I am also extremely grateful for the advice of Pauline Hire at Cambridge University Press, and for the scrupulous copy-editing of Susan Moore. Finally, I would like to thank my family, Matty and Peggy Fox, Duncan Kennedy and Synnøva O'Gorman, and especially my mother, Pauline O'Gorman, to whom this book is dedicated.