

THRASYLLUS IN TACITUS (ANN. 6.21)

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We can only conjecture how many of the decisions and acts of Tiberius during his long principate were influenced or even determined by Thrasyllus, the one adviser in whom he appears to have had implicit and even unlimited confidence. The origin of this extraordinary friendship has been satisfactorily and, I am sure, correctly explained by Frederick H. Cramer.¹⁾

When Tiberius, resenting the indignities put upon him by the man who was his stepfather and father-in-law, retired to Rhodes, Thrasyllus, an Alexandrian, perhaps of Greek ancestry, was one of the most eminent of the competing professors in that intellectual capital. According to Cramer, he "must be considered not only one of the most versatile, but also one of the most profound scholars of his era." We may doubt the profundity, which is not necessarily the same as subtlety, but we cannot question the versatility or the learning attested by Cramer's catalogue of his accomplishments, to which I add only the suggestion that the opinions and teaching of Thrasyllus may have changed in the course of a career of which the stages are summarized, I think, by a scholium on Juvenal: *multarum artium scientiam professus postremo se dedit Platonicae sectae ac deinde mathesi.*²⁾ A *grammaticus* with so

1) *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia 1954), p. 94. For plausible conjectures concerning Thrasyllus's possibly enormous influence on historical events, see pp. 99-108.

2) *Ad Iuv.* 6.576. The scholiast is commonly disregarded because his concise note ends with a statement that when Thrasyllus thought himself in danger from Tiberius, *dolum cum praesensit, fugit*, which is taken to mean that he fled from Rhodes, whereas it is almost certain that he

comprehensive a knowledge of Greek literature that he could be expected to identify a verse quoted from almost any poet,³⁾ he turned to philosophy and collected and edited (on the basis of earlier editions) the works of Democritus⁴⁾ and Plato, on both of which he commented extensively and tendentiously, if not disingenuously. Like many literary men, he may have had a tropism toward mystic visions of a "better world" and eloquence about "spiritual values," and thus have felt a need to deny the cool rationalism of the New Academy, which, after a long eclipse, became the basis of modern science. It is also possible that he perceived that learned and cultivated mystery-mongers can always reap a very abundant income from sentimentally gullible members of the upper and wealthier classes who are sufficiently well-bred to disdain unkempt and semi-literate fakirs.

At all events, in his "interpretation" of Plato he began the process of adulterating and distorting the Platonic doctrine with Neo-Pythagorean and Oriental occultism that was to result in the theological dogmas of Neo-Platonism.⁵⁾ And it is likely that he tried to foist similar fantasies on Democritus.⁶⁾ Addiction to occult verbiage, or alternatively a perspicacious perception of what would be profitable in a world that had lost faith in reason while hurrying from one catastrophe to another, naturally led to astrology, which had been conclusively refuted by the New Academy (ex-

accompanied Tiberius when the latter returned to Rome. Read <ef>*fugit*, i.e. *dolum effugit* on the analogy of *periculum effugere*, 'he eluded the trap,' doubtless in the way described by Tacitus.

3) Hence Augustus's quizzical jest, Suet. *Aug.* 98.4.

4) The explicit testimony of Diogenes Laërtius is doubted by Cramer (p. 93), who follows scholars who thought Democritus an author most unlikely to engage the attention of a Platonist.

5) Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 21, lists in chronologically reversed order Numenius, Cronius, Moderatus, and Thrasylus.

6) He ignorantly or knowingly included forgeries in his edition; see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 2 (Cambridge 1965), p. 388, n. 1, and works there cited. Diogenes Laërtius, 9.7.38, cites Thrasylus as authority for relations between Democritus and Pythagoras that are at least open to grave suspicion, and Thrasylus may be the source of the absurd story (9.7.34) about Persian Magi and *Chaldaei* for which the authority of Herodotus is claimed, perhaps disingenuously.

cept for the one minor detail that Diogenes of Seleucia conceded to it⁷⁾): one superstition leads to another, *abyssus abyssum invocat*. It was doubtless at this stage of his career that Thrasyllus met Tiberius. His evidently copious writings on astrology may (or may not) have been composed after he reached Rome, the terrestrial paradise of the ambitious.

Tiberius, in a retirement that must have suggested the sulking of Achilles, was at Rhodes *circa scholas et auditoria professorum assiduus*,⁸⁾ and the presence of a man who was at once so prominent and so politically disgraced that he could compromise his acquaintances in the eyes of Rome's boss, must have been acutely embarrassing to the professors. Most of them probably tried to be circumspectly ambiguous in their attitude, but two were bold enough to gamble on their prognostications of the future: one openly snubbed Tiberius, the other, Thrasyllus, recognizing opportunity, attached himself to the fallen dynast with prudent devotion. Cramer is certainly right when he attributes the growth of the friendship to "the friendlessness of Tiberius who 'in the seclusion of Rhodes had habituated himself to shun society.' ... Tiberius must have been particularly attracted to the brilliant Greek whose company helped him while away many hours which might otherwise have been empty."

It is in this context that we must consider the story told by Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.20.2-21.3), who attributes to Tiberius

...scientia Chaldaeorum artis, cuius apiscendae otium apud Rhodum, magistrum Thrasyllum habuit, peritiam eius hoc modo

7) It has always been a matter of common observation that the children of one man by one woman, if not identical twins, always differ greatly from one another in temperament and mentality, although they receive the same nurture and education. Before the genetic processes that ineluctably determine innate qualities were scientifically ascertained, the significant variable seemed to be time of conception and birth, and hence astral influences. (The alternatives were unperceived causes, metempsychosis, and special creation by a god or gods who artistically avoided duplication in their handiwork.) This is what Diogenes meant when he conceded to the astrologers (*Cic. Div.* 2.43.90) *ut praedicere possint dumtaxat qualis quisque natura et ad quam quisque maxime rem aptus futurus sit*.

8) *Suet. Tib.* 11.3.

expertus.

(21.1) Quotiens super tali negotio consultaret, edita domus parte ac liberti unius conscientia utebatur. Is litterarum ignarus, corpore valido, per avia ac derupta (nam saxis domus imminet) praeibat eum, cuius artem experiri Tiberius statuisset, et regredientem, si vanitatis aut fraudum suspicio incesserat, in subiectum mare praecipitabat, ne index arcani existeret. (2) Igitur Thrasyllus iisdem rupibus inductus, postquam percunctantem commoverat, imperium ipsi et futura sollerter patefaciens, interrogatur an suam quoque genitalem horam comperisset, quem tum annum, qualem diem haberet. Ille positus siderum ac spatia dimensus haerere primo, dein pavescere et, quantum introspiceret, magis ac magis trepidus admirationis et metus, postremo exclamat ambiguum sibi ac prope ultimum discrimen instare. (3) Tum complexus eum Tiberius praescium periculorum et incolumem fore gratatur, quaeque dixerat oracli vice accipiens inter intimos amicorum tenet.

This story was denounced by Alexander H. Krappe as "melodramatic claptrap" which could "find credence only among adepts in astrology."⁹) His verdict has been generally accepted. Ernst Kornemann rejects the story as "ein Märchen."¹⁰) Cramer dismisses it as a mere "fable" that is patently absurd. Erich Koestermann in his commentary *ad loc.* (II, 289) says it is "alles andere als glaubwürdig."

9) *AJP* 48 (1927) 361f. Krappe goes on to derive the story from the tale about Nectanebus in the Pseudo-Callisthenes, which he oddly quotes from a translation from the Syriac, although the story, of course, is found in the Greek text, in the vulgate (longer) version at 1.14.8-21, and, naturally, in Julius Valerius, 1.8.

10) *Tiberius* (Stuttgart 1960), p. 35, n. 3. Modern historians of the period presumably agree, for they scarcely mention Thrasyllus and discuss Tiberius without reference to what Kornemann aptly calls the *Zeitkrankheit*. Barbara Levick, in her elaborate and impressive study, *Tiberius the Politician* (London 1976), although recognizing (p. 224) that "Tiberius became a fatalist, ruled by astrology," makes only passing mention of Thrasyllus and does not consider the possibility that Tiberius was consequently ruled by his astrologer. Morally and historically a ruler must bear the responsibility for his acts, whether or not he was influenced or even manipulated by his advisers, but when we undertake to analyze psychologically the character of Tiberius, we may lament, but cannot ignore, the presence of an indeterminable *x* in our equations. We may, for example, deplore, as does Miss Levick (pp. 178, 186), the "monstrous and illegal" killing of Sejanus's young children, but we can never know whether Thrasyllus had cast their horoscopes and warned Tiberius that he must do more than scotch the young serpents. If Thrasyllus was an *éminence grise*, anyone who will take the trouble can extrapolate from the extant evidence three different, but not implausible, theories why that shrewd and subtle man made the stars serve a specially implacable animosity.

Is this summary rejection of the story warranted? Obviously we cannot hope ever to ascertain what really happened, and no one would contend that the story as it stands is acceptable in all its details, but is it so utterly implausible that we should simply ignore it? In other words, can we elicit from the text of Tacitus an account which *could* be true, which could be the source of the less circumstantial references to the same event in other writers,¹¹⁾ and which we have no grounds for impeaching?

One thing is quite certain. Thrasyllus predicted Tiberius's accession to power with some accuracy, for otherwise Tiberius's confidence in him and faith in the art he professed would be inexplicable. Cramer seems strangely to imply that Thrasyllus may have merely expounded what he read in Tiberius's horoscope, and it is remotely possible that the horoscope, according to the rules that Thrasyllus may have followed, did portend supreme power for Tiberius and the hundreds of other men born at the same time, but such a coincidence is extremely improbable.

Thrasyllus had no need to consult the stars to predict that Tiberius, though then in disgrace and apparently a political nonentity, would succeed Augustus. It was obvious to any intelligent man that if two striplings, boys of fourteen and eleven when Tiberius retired to Rhodes, died or gave proof of incompetence, Augustus would have no feasible

11) These will be considered summarily below. Krappe considers the discrepancies between the stories told by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio proof of a purely mythical origin, and the differences, for which I shall attempt to account, may influence modern historians, who are probably more moved by the obvious folly of all forms of divination to minimize consideration of Thrasyllus. For example, H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, p. 372, even implies that it is "uncertain" whether astrology entered into the friendship between Tiberius and the astrologer, and I take it that Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass. 1966), pp. 132, 140, regards the story of the prediction of Tiberius as "invented after the event," as is probably true of many stories of such predictions, e.g., Tiberius's supposed prediction to Galba (unless it was made to ensure Galba's loyalty in the meantime). Only Ronald Syme, who paraphrases Tacitus without criticizing the details (*Tacitus*, p. 525), evidently sees that Tiberius must have in some way tested the power of Thrasyllus.

alternative but to make Tiberius his successor. Neither of the boys appears to have been robust, and the elder, at least, may early have given proof of a weakness of judgment or nerves beyond what could be attributed to his youth and was in the end charitably attributed to mental aberration resulting from a comparatively slight wound. And if death or manifest incompetence did not eliminate the boys? Thrasyllus, we may be sure, was intelligent enough to see that if Augustus, who was nearing sixty, were to die suddenly, Tiberius could take over at once, as he, who held the *tribunicia potestas* and at least a proconsular *imperium*, had the legal right and duty to do, and as he, given his undoubted prestige with the armies, would have the power to do.

And if Augustus did not die? Thrasyllus doubtless had judicious correspondents at Rome who kept him informed of the political situation of which we, given the "singular lack of historical evidence for the nine years... 6 B.C.-A.D.4,"¹²⁾ have only a few glimpses. Augustus pretended to have "restored the Republic," and the aristocracy, for reasons of its own, pretended to believe him. The populace was permitted the amusement of elections, which could become as exciting as gladiatorial shows, although a choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee could not alter national or domestic policy. It appears, however, that electoral contests, besides providing wholesome exercise for influential men who coveted what was still regarded as the highest civil office and distinction,¹³⁾ could be used to bring pressure on Augustus with regard to the succession, and it is even possible that the premature grooming of Gaius Caesar as his successor, which so offended Tiberius, was forced on him against his wishes.¹⁴⁾ We need not speculate about obscure

12) Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, pp. 392f.

13) Probably until the accession of Tiberius, election to consular office bestowed *nobilitas*; see Ernst Stein, *Hermes* 52 (1917) 564-571; cf. *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 (1978) 249-254.

14) Barbara Levick's elaborate reconstruction of the politics of this period, *Latomus* 31 (1972) 779-813; 35 (1976) 301-339, is necessarily in large part conjectural, but her argument that a clique around Julia

political intrigues of which we know so little, but it is certain that the elder Julia was the keystone in the political arch of Tiberius's enemies, and it would have required little prescience to foresee that in the struggle between Tiberius's wife and Tiberius's mother, the patient, astute, and prudent woman would eventually ruin her frivolous, reckless, and libidinous younger rival.

Thrasylus, we may be sure, was intelligent enough to see that Tiberius had an excellent chance to become the next *princeps*, and also to see that he had everything to gain, and nothing to lose, by assuring Tiberius that the stars destined him for supreme power. The prediction was necessarily made privately to Tiberius and kept secret. It would probably be known to no one, if Tiberius died or if, fifteen years or more later, he found himself effectually excluded from what the stars had promised. And in that event, Thrasylus had only to catch the first ship out of Rhodes to put himself securely beyond the reach of a man who had no governmental power. And if, by some mischance, the prediction did become known, not even Thrasylus's competence as an astrologer would be seriously compromised: the data with which Tiberius supplied him must have been inaccurate, or Tiberius had misunderstood as categorical a prediction made with the reservation that there would be one or more critical moments when the astral forces would be in balance and the result uncertain, or some other excuse, plausible to the credulous, could be easily devised.¹⁵⁾

instigated the election of Gaius in 6 B.C. against the wishes of Augustus will commend itself to all who believe that Augustus, however determined to confine the succession to his own blood-line, was too prudent to precipitate a domestic crisis by contriving the election as consul of a boy who was legally an infant, thus making a mockery of his pretense that he had "restored the Republic."

15) According to Cassius Dio, 58.27.1, Thrasylus, shortly before Tiberius died, had the stars predict that the old man would live another ten years, and the ingenious explanation of that prediction (which, since the astromancer died even before his patron, must have been devised by his son and heir to his mantic business, Tib. Claudius Balbillus) could cover up what had been merely a bad guess. The explanation, however, credits Thrasylus with a calculated deception from a preposterously humanitarian motive, and was probably excogitated to

Thrasyllos made the prediction. Tiberius, surely, was not so gullible as to accept a simple statement, and must have inquired into details, concerning which Thrasyllos was clever enough to cover shrewd guesses with the ambiguities and provisos that successful soothsayers must always have in store. Even so, we should not expect Tiberius to be fully convinced before the prediction proved to be correct.

This brings us to the obvious flaw in Tacitus's narrative.

conceal an astrological expedient to further Thrasyllos's intrigues to assure the succession to his granddaughter's paramour, Caligula, on which see Cramer, *op. cit.*, pp. 105ff.

We must keep in mind the fact that Thrasyllos, like all professionals, practiced *catarchic* astrology. For an outline of the major astrological theories, see Cramer, pp. 14-44, but for our purposes we need note only a fundamental distinction that is sometimes obscured, even in Cramer's later pages, by use of the term 'fatalistic.' The adjective is indeed applicable to all forms of a doctrine that men's lives are governed by astral influences, but for clarity it should be reserved for the theory that a man's destiny is totally and unalterably fixed by the stars presiding over his nativity, and will be fulfilled, *no matter what subsequently happens*, as is maintained by Apollonius in the passage from the romance cited by Cramer, p. 223. This uncompromising view was held by theorists, but obviously could not commend itself to practitioners, who would have to make categorical predictions and could collect only one fee from a customer. *Catarchic* astrology, on the other hand, was very good for business, since, reduced to its essentials, it held that while the stars at nativity portended a man's destiny, the fulfillment of the portent depended on the man's proper response to stellar influences in every decision he made in the course of his life. The dupe was thus obliged continually to ascertain whether the astral forces were favorable or adverse before he embarked on an undertaking, which would end in failure if begun at an unpropitious moment and might even cancel the destiny portended at his nativity. This ingenious theory not only made the sucker dependent on astromancers throughout his life, but provided an ample margin for explaining away unfortunate guesses. Very intricate calculations are obviously necessary, for the constant motion of the heavens makes not only days but hours and even minutes important in determining stellar influences at conception (!) and birth, and on those calculations depends the significance of equally precise observations at the inception of every undertaking, and, of course, the necessary allowances for latitude and longitude must be made for the places involved. The method reaches its logical culmination today in the antics of actor and others who, from superstition or a desire for publicity, sign contracts and have marriages solemnized under the supervision of an astrologer, who, watching the second-hand of his chronometer, signals the precise instant at which the benign influences of the planets are at maximum intensity. This *catarchic* theory, of course, underlies Tiberius's inquiry whether Thrasyllos had computed the stellar forces acting on his own destiny at the time of their interview—and it explains why Tiberius, as Cassius Dio reports, 57.15.7, kept Thrasyllos constantly at his side *μαντείῳ τινὶ καθ' ἑκάστην ἡμέραν χρώμενος*.

Chapter 21 begins naturally enough: whenever Tiberius consulted Thrasyllus (*quotiens... consultaret*¹⁶⁾) on so secret a subject, he would, of course, make sure that they could not be overheard or interrupted, and he would have no attendant except an ignorant but powerful slave, who could serve as bodyguard, if necessary.¹⁷⁾ But after we have been startled by the tense of *incesserat* and had our suspicion confirmed by *praecipitabat*, we have to understand that what is being described is not a testing of Thrasyllus but Tiberius's habitual behavior toward several or many astrologers. At this point, I am sure, every attentive reader looked hopefully at the apparatus for some peculiarity on which he could hang the obvious emendations, and he may even have scrutinized the facsimile of the Medicean manuscript before despairing. Alas! we must suppose that the text is what Tacitus wrote. As Krappe says, we simply cannot believe that Tiberius indulged in a "wholesale slaughter" of the astrologers at Rhodes, and we must agree with Cramer that, if Tiberius had done so, Thrasyllus (or any man intelligent enough to work the astrological business) would not have blithely accepted an invitation to become another corpse on the rocks or in the sea at the base of the cliff. The fox in Aesop had no difficulty in grasping the significance of footprints that went into the lion's cave but did not return.

Let us assume that the preposterous statement is a blunder, conceivably arising from textual corruption but more probably from the author's uncritical acceptance of what he found in his source.¹⁸⁾ If a single memorable event was distorted and described as customary—if Tiberius, instead of

16) The subjunctive is tolerable in Tacitus and Silver Latin in general.

17) Tiberius would scarcely have neglected so elementary a precaution, even if the interview took place before the sycophants of Gaius openly volunteered to assassinate the lad's unloved stepfather (Suet. *Tib.*13.1). Since a slave would in most circumstances be more reliable than a *libertus*, I assume that the bodyguard was a slave at the time of the incident and later freed in recognition of his services.

18) On the probable source, see below, p. 142f.

acquiring the habit of feeding inept astrologers to the fish, devised a specific and rigorous test of his new friend's skill and sincerity—the story becomes plausible and even probable. Tiberius at Rhodes was an embittered man, but even if he had not recently been embittered by the conduct of Augustus and others in whom he had placed some confidence, he was no longer a youth, and experience must have taught him a prudently cynical estimate of human nature. He cannot have been so naif as not to wonder whether the author of such roseate predictions, which could have been devised to excite his own secret but divinable hopes, and which, in the nature of things, could not be verified for years to come, was not a flatterer and a fraud; and it must have occurred to him that a man who induced him to make inquiries that could be represented as treason, might be a spy or *agent provocateur*.¹⁹⁾ If Tiberius was not to remain in suspense and possibly even in danger, he had to devise some means of assuring himself of his new friend's good faith and competence in the mantic art.

Tiberius, furthermore, was an eminently practical and, indeed, a ruthless man. We must not imagine that our contemporary political leaders were the first to discover that when an inferior threatens their peace of mind and it is not expedient to have him murdered, the obvious thing to do is to instruct a reliable technician to arrange a suitable accident or, if more convenient, a convincing suicide. And when the eminently dispensable man must walk along a narrow path on the edge of a cliff, a muscular and obedient slave is the only technician needed. We may reasonably suppose that if Thrasyllus had failed the test, his foot would have slipped on the path, and his acquaintances would have sagely remarked that the poor man never did have a good head for heights or that he was so professorily absent-minded that he

19) Given Tiberius's prestige with the armies, suspicions that he was planning a *coup d'état* must have arisen soon after his retirement and certainly while he still held the tribunician power and an *imperium* that was perhaps *maius*, although Suetonius (*Tib.* 12.3-13.1) implies that the currency of the suspicions alarmed Augustus only later.

sometimes did not look where he was walking. It would have been a model instance of what the professionals now call neatness and dispatch.

The test that Tiberius devised doubtless seemed adequate and decisive to him. No one could possibly know what he meditated in his own mind, and he need not have instructed his slave until just before he and Thrasyllus retired to the secluded spot chosen for the consultation. We may suppose that after Thrasyllus had glibly expounded what the planets foretold and specifically their catarchic bearing on that particular day,²⁰⁾ Tiberius inquired in a casual and off-hand manner whether the astromancer had made a similar computation for himself. Tiberius, we may be sure, avoided exhibiting more than a mild interest in the question, but he did not know, as indeed most men today do not know, that while a man can control his features and voice sufficiently to deceive most others, a skilled and subtle observer can deduce his state of mind from minute and unconscious changes in his lineaments, glances, intonation, and breathing. We may be certain that Thrasyllus had mastered the art that modern "mind readers" exhibit on the stage and modern "psychics" use to dazzle their customers.²¹⁾ The technique of

20) Presumably with reference to some real or feigned project in accordance with the catarchic method (note 15 above).

21) In the classification of magic by the celebrated magician of the Nineteenth Century, Robert-Houdin, as reported by H.E. Evans in his introduction to the articles, chiefly from the *Scientific American*, collected by Albert Hopkins, *Magic* (New York 1898; reprinted 1976), the technique in question here falls in the third category: "secret thought read by an ingenious system of diagnosis and sometimes compelled to take a particular direction by certain subtle artifices." It must be distinguished from most exhibitions of "telepathy," such as those by the famous Houdini, which involve the use of an accomplice, electrical devices, or both. The most common form of mind-reading in this third category is called "muscle reading" by magicians, since it involves contact with the person whose thoughts are being read, usually by holding his or her hand, which enables a skilled operator to detect most of the phenomena now commonly detected by a sphygmomanometer ("lie-detector") and to supplement them by visual observation. When there is no physical contact, the mind-reader, who has developed acute visual and auditory senses by diligent training, must minutely observe the subject's unconscious ideomotor reactions to subtly leading questions or to comments and exclamations made by the mind-reader to give direction

making such observations must have been developed when the art of preying on human credulity advanced beyond the telling of mirific tales with rhetorical effectiveness and the use of prestidigitation and mechanical contrivances to perform miracles.²²⁾

Thrasylus pretended to make the long and involved calculations necessary to determine the astral influences on him at that particular moment, covertly watching Tiberius and doubtless noting his unconscious reactions to pertinent comments and exclamations until he was certain that Tiberius's interest was more than casual, whence it would necessarily follow that his own science was being tested. He then pretended—or perhaps, knowing Tiberius, he had no need to pretend—that he was terrified by a discovery that his fate hung in balance at that very moment. It was a safe guess,

to the subject's thoughts. Such, obviously, was the position of Thrasylus vis-à-vis Tiberius. The most concise catalogue of the methods of diagnosis may be found in D.H. Rawcliffe's *The Psychology of the Occult* (London 1952; reprinted, New York 1976, under the title *Occult and Supernatural Phenomena*), pp. 379-425, 463-478.

22) I know of no ancient reference to the methods of mind-reading. (The *physiognomonic* whose writings are collected in Förster's Teubner edition seem to have been interested only in determining innate character.) Obviously; however, the techniques would have been closely guarded trade-secrets, perhaps transmitted only orally, and we possess astonishingly little ancient information about thaumaturgic technology. A few miracle-making machines are described by Hero, but we must agree with Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Ancient Greek Gadgets and Machines* (New York 1966), pp. 97, 101f., that many other and more elaborate machines were used in temples to show the way of gods to men. Livy (39.13.12) knew the secret of the miraculous torches that were carried by hysterical women during the Bacchanalian craze, but chemically similar miracles are reported by Suetonius (*Tib.* 14.3), Cassius Dio (54.9.6), and Pausanias (5.27.3) with no indication that those authors did not suppose the phenomena to be of supernatural origin. And the secret of the hallucinatory drugs that were doubtless used to produce religious experiences and thus supplement the effects of overheated imaginations and psychopathic tendencies was so closely kept that one finds no reference to them even in the recent and discerning study of E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951). I note in passing that R. Gordon Wasson, who first identified the *soma* of the Hindus and *homa* of the Zoroastrians as the sacred mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*), believes that several different hallucinogens were used at Eleusis; see his contribution to *Flesh of the Gods*, edited by Peter Furst (New York 1972), pp. 194f. The use of drugs in the various mystery-cults was doubtless a priestly secret. The technique of mind-reading, we may believe, was as successfully kept a trade-secret.

for if Tiberius intended to do no more than renounce his friendship if he failed the test, would it not be the astrologer's cruel fate to be heart-broken by the loss of a beautiful friendship?

Like many a dupe of shrewd soothsayers today, Tiberius was convinced: the stars must have told Thrasyllus what would happen to him if Tiberius gave a significant nod to his slave. Here, at last, was a science of the future! And here was a man whose catarchic prognostications Tiberius would continuously need to guide his own conduct from day to day. We may be certain that Tiberius took Thrasyllus with him when, to the astonishment of the politicians who had deemed him a political has-been, he was recalled to Rome by Augustus in A.D. 2, and if he had any faint and lingering doubts, they vanished when he, doubtless guided by Thrasyllus, became the destined successor of Augustus two years later.

The foregoing is, I believe, an entirely plausible account of what could have happened, and it conforms strictly to the narrative in Tacitus except for the reference to consultation of other astrologers. We naturally have no way of determining that this is what actually happened, but the story receives some support from the consideration that Tiberius must have tested the skill of Thrasyllus before reposing great confidence in him. The future princeps was not a sentimental woman to be charmed by a soothsayer's specious verbiage and unverified claims. Given the circumstances, one cannot suggest a more effective test of the astromancer's powers than the one described, or one that would have seemed more cogent to Tiberius. *Se non è vero, è molto ben trovato.*

Tacitus's source could have been some treatise *de divinatione* that discussed the very problem he raises in the following chapter, but the underlying source must have been favorable to the claims of astrology, for that would explain the one false element in the story, the implication that Tiberius had tried and disposed of a number of incompetent astrologers before finding in Thrasyllus a master of the

science. Professionals who exploit human credulity are always in competition with one another, and with all but the most ignorant victims they find it necessary to explain away the ill-repute of soothsayers and the known failures of the kind of divination they are peddling, and each naturally admits that there are many incompetent or fraudulent practitioners of the art that he, a paragon of learning and integrity, is professing. The standard sales technique of all mystery-mongers was, of course, used by ancient astromancers, producing the opinion that Tacitus reports as held by most of his contemporaries, but does not himself endorse (Ann. 6.22.3):

plurimis mortalium non eximitur, quin primo cuiusque ortu
ventura destinentur, sed quaedam secus quam dicta sint ca-
dere fallaciis ignara dicentium: ita corrumpi fidem artis,
cuius clara documenta et antiqua aetas et nostra tulerit.

A story that Tiberius, having found many wanting, found a genuine expert in Thrasyllus was, of course, a perfect *documentum* to show the *fides artis*.²³⁾

The story in Tacitus is plausible. The other extant references to this episode are not. Cassius Dio seems to have used a source that discounted the claims of astrology or, at least, could not believe that Thrasyllus had been warned of his danger by the stars. According to this version,²⁴⁾

23) If, as G.B. Townend guesses *obiter* in his article on the sources of Suetonius, *Hermes* 88 (1960) 115-120, Thrasyllus's son, Tib. Claudius Balbillus, was one of Tacitus's sources, he is the obvious source for stories about his father (cf. note 15 above). Balbillus carried on his father's business and would have had an obvious interest in preconizing it in some work that celebrated his father's "science"; that he was capable of writing such a work and did in fact write on various subjects is shown by Seneca's reference (*Nat. quaest.* 4a.2.13) to him as *perfectus in omni litterarum genere rarissime*. He would, of course, have written after the death of Tiberius and would have had no reason not to conform to the almost universal condemnation of his father's dupe; the suggestion of W. Gundel in Pauly-Wissowa, VI A, 581, that the story about Tiberius's test came from a "vielleicht in Tiberius feindlicher Entstellung geschriebenen Tradition," would thus be verified. And Balbillus, writing in an atmosphere of hostility to the memory of Tiberius and concerned to enhance the prestige of his business, could well have added the detail about what Krappe called the "wholesale slaughter" of inept astromancers.

24) 55.11.1-3; the essential part of this passage comes just before

Tiberius decided to eliminate the one man who knew all his plans (ἐπειδὴ μόνος αὐτῷ πάνθ' ὅσα ἐνενόει συνῆδει), it being unexplained what cogitations Tiberius had confided to Thrasyllus, presumably in conversation, so that the reader is at liberty to imagine anything from a scheme to liquidate the young Caesares to projects to be put into effect when Tiberius at last attained power. Tiberius accordingly decided to throw Thrasyllus ἀπὸ τοῦ τείχους, presumably the city wall, unless we imagine that Tiberius's house resembled a Mediaeval castle—a foolishly public spot for an assassination and a very inconvenient one, since a man walking along a broad parapet would not naturally step close to the crenels, and it would be necessary to wrestle with him before throwing him over, and if, as is implied, Tiberius intended to do the work himself, he was so foolhardy as to take the risk that his victim might take the assailant with him. Before attacking Thrasyllus, however, Tiberius noticed that he had a dejected or downcast countenance (σχυθροπιάσαντα αὐτὸν ἰδὼν), and, inquiring, was told that his intended victim suspected that he was in some danger (κίνδυνόν τινα ὑποπεύειν), the verb obviously indicating something less than certainty, so that we must suppose Thrasyllus had a presentiment or even guessed that something in Tiberius's manner boded no good to him. Tiberius, marvelling (θαυμάσας) that Thrasyllus foresaw (προεἶδεν) what he was going to do, thenceforth cherished him. At some later time, Thrasyllus, seeing a ship in the offing, predicted that it brought the news of Tiberius's recall to Rome. The basis for the prediction is not stated, but obviously was not an astrological computation, since Thrasyllus had to see the ship before

one of the lacunae in the Marcian codex. The corresponding passages in Xiphilinus and Zonaras are given in Boissevain's edition *ad loc.* It must be noted that while Cassius Dio accepted the story in which we are interested as a proof of astromancy (he has just stated that Tiberius and Thrasyllus had learned from the stars when Lucius and Gaius would die), he introduces this story with καὶ λόγον γε ἔχει, which clearly shows that he is turning to another source, which obviously cannot have been the one (Balbillus?) used by Tacitus. Since Dio certainly would not have attenuated a report of the marvels of astromancy, his source for this particular story (a Roman historian?) must have done so.

divining its errand.

In Byzantine excerpts from what appears to have been a compilation of notable feats of astrologers,²⁵⁾ we are told that Tiberius, being for some unstated reason vexed with Thrasyllus (ἀγανακτήσας κατ' αὐτοῦ), decided to pitch him from the wall, but saw that the man looked depressed (ἐσιτύγνασε) and inquired. The exact words of Thrasyllus's reply are quoted: "αἰσθάνομαι μέγιστον κλιμακτῆρα ἐγγύς μου ὄντα." The verb is noteworthy. A separate article is devoted to the ship seen in the offing and bearing news of Tiberius's recall to Rome.

Suetonius (*Tib.* 14.4) combines the two incidents. Tiberius, believing Thrasyllus to be a fraud, because his predictions had not been fulfilled, and a spy, who used his professed art to learn Tiberius's secrets, decided to pitch him into the sea—presumably from a cliff—while they were out strolling together: *cum quidem illum durius et contra praedicta cadentibus rebus ut falsum et secretorum temere conscium, ... dum spatiatur una, praecipitare in mare destinasset.* At the very moment (*eo ipso momento*) that Tiberius is about to give his companion the necessary shove, Thrasyllus is saved by asserting *nave provisa gaudium afferri*. Now since *provisa* corresponds to πύρωθεν κατιδών in Xiphilinus, it must be taken as meaning only that Thrasyllus descried the ship in the distance and with no implication of any kind of mantic foreknowledge. He was therefore saved only by a coincidence and what could have been merely a lucky guess. Nothing is conceded to his astrological skill, and if one interprets the words *contra praedicta cadentibus rebus* strictly, he is credited with forecasts that were found to be wrong and contrary to what actually happened, with the obvious implication that either Thrasyllus was inept or astrology is fallacious. It is most unlikely that Suetonius altered the tenor of his source, which,

25) Edited by Cumont from a Tenth-Century manuscript, *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum*, 8.4 (Bruxellis 1921), pp. 99ff. Cumont believes the source of the compilation to have been a complete text of Cassius Dio, but would that text have included the words of Thrasyllus that I quote?

therefore, must have been sceptical of, if not hostile to, the pretensions of the astrologers.

Suetonius, like Tacitus, attributes to Tiberius grave doubts of the astromancer's competence and loyalty, and in his version the coincidental appearance of the ship in the nick of time is a test, which, although not planned by Tiberius, does convince him of Thrasyllus's ability and fidelity.²⁶⁾ But the two stories as they stand cannot refer to the same incident, for the implication in Tacitus is that the test took place soon after Tiberius became acquainted with Thrasyllus, presumably soon after Tiberius retired to Rhodes in 6 B.C., whereas the ship obviously arrived in A.D. 2. We cannot suppose that Tiberius twice intended to have Thrasyllus kicked into the Carpathian Sea, but the story about the ship could have a basis in fact. It is not unlikely that Thrasyllus, shrewd as he was, predicted that the ruin of Julia (which he could easily have foreseen) would be followed by the recall of Tiberius, and could even have made the stars advise Tiberius to intercede for his disgraced wife (what better way of regaining the favor of her father?), and then, when Augustus proved obdurate for almost four years and Tiberius's tribunician power and *imperium* expired, Tiberius's faith must have been shaken and Thrasyllus needed all his cunning and ingenuity to devise plausible explanations of his miscalculation. Tiberius could understandably have become impatient or despondent during those years and have begun to reconsider his confidence in the "science" of his "friend"; it is not impossible that the arrival of the ship (which probably bore an insigne identifying it as an official despatch-boat, and which did not outrun reliable information that Augustus was going to yield) did save Thrasyllus from being kicked out of the household in which he had so comfortably ensconced himself.

All this is mere speculation, of course, but it does

26) Suetonius (*Tib.* 14.4) introduces the story with the statement *Thrasyllum... mathematicum, quem ut sapientiae professorem contubernio admoverat, tum maxime expertus est...*

permit us, if we want to speculate some more, to imagine that some Roman historian, having Tacitus's source before him but refusing to believe in the "wholesale slaughter," and refusing to believe in the catarchic astrology by which Thrasyllus was said to have become aware of his peril, but attracted by the notion of kicking the magus into the briny deep, tried to make sense of the story by combining it with an account, conceivably in the same source,²⁷⁾ of a crisis in the relations between Tiberius and his soothsayer during the time in which it seemed that not even the ruin of Julia would procure the recall of Tiberius. If there was such an historian, neither his work nor Tacitus's source was known to Cassius Dio, who, we may suppose, used a historian who, although perhaps equally sceptical of astromancy, kept the two incidents separate.

With the exception of the brief scholium on Juvenal,²⁸⁾ Tacitus alone gives a version of the story that appears to confirm the claims of the pseudo-science, and that version (with one correction) is the only plausible one. It could be the source of the other versions, if these were transmitted through writers who quite reasonably refused to admit the possibility of the astrological calculation by which Thrasyllus was reported as having convinced Tiberius of his scientific skill. And now, if we suppose that the incident described by Tacitus actually took place, we can go on to speculate whether Tiberius and Rome would not have been much happier, had Tiberius made the gesture that would have instructed his slave that Thrasyllus was destined to meet with

27) If the hypothesis that Balbillus wrote about his father (note 23 above) is correct, he could have described Tiberius as impatient at this time and angry with Thrasyllus, thus illustrating the folly of doubting the infallible science of a great astrologer. A sceptic, of course, would have given his own interpretation to the story.

28) The scholium (see note 2 above) says that Tiberius wanted to hurl Thrasyllus *in pelagum quasi conscium promissae dominationis*, which implies, of course, that the astrologer had really ascertained the future. If it is not futile to look for logic in so condensed a statement, it implies a belief in strictly fatalistic astrology (note 15 above), since under the catarchic system Tiberius would not have been so mad as to destroy an expert whose services he would need, as he is reported to have in fact used them, καθ' ἐκείστην ἡμέραν.

a fatal accident on the way home.

When we try to account for the actions of Tiberius during his principate, we must (alack!) take into account the possible or probable influence of Thrasyllus and estimate, as best we may, his putative character and ambitions, but my only concern here has been to sketch a conjectural and necessarily unverifiable hypothesis (itself based largely on historical reconstructions that are probable rather than certain²⁹⁾) that provides a reasonable explanation of a passage in Tacitus and of the discordant versions of the story in other historical sources. We are dealing with one of the points, so sadly numerous in both ancient and more recent history, at which von Ranke himself would have despaired of ever ascertaining *wie es eigentlich gewesen wäre*.

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29) I have cited at each point the scholar whose views I have followed; to rehash debates over disputed points would have served only to multiply pages. Much of the evidence I have used is, of course, open to challenge. To begin with, the commonly accepted identification of the editor of Plato with the astromancer, and of the latter's relationship to Tib. Claudius Balbillus and Ennia Thrasylla, could be disputed. This is a cardinal point, for if Thrasyllus, instead of being a scholar of distinction who could plausibly pretend to a disinterested "scientific" interest, was a professional soothsayer living by his wits, Tiberius's confidence in him becomes less explicable, and a captious critic could doubt that astrology was the real link between them; a nimble imagination could even gratuitously suggest an analogy with the celebrated Dr. Dee of Elizabethan times, who used astrology as an instrument of espionage and is credited with having thus uncovered at least one plot against the Queen's life: see Richard Deacon, *A History of the British Secret Service* (New York 1969), pp. 12f., 16, 30, 41, with the references to his biography of Dee (London 1968). The circumstances of Tiberius's retirement to Rhodes have been endlessly discussed, and even his legal powers may be questioned. It is only probable that he continued to hold until 1 B.C. his tribunician power and the *imperium* that is principally inferred from the exercise of power recorded by Suetonius, *Tib.* 11.3, although Barbara Levick (1972, p. 781) refers to a "wealth of evidence" in a work by C.E. Stevens that I have not located. If Tiberius did hold an *imperium maius*, and if Augustus had died shortly after 6 B.C., his enemies at Rome might or might not have been able to prevent or block his exercise of it. And so on. With so many uncertainties in the evidence or modern interpretations of it, one can only select the views that seem most probable as a basis for more tenuous speculations.