

A Sallustian Echo in Tacitus

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"Even a slight modification in the form of a familiar term may lack parallel. Nobody else thought of varying 'bella civilia' with 'bella civium.' That being so, it may not be fanciful to suppose that some of the unusual expressions that emerge for the first time in Tacitus, and seldom or never again, might be of his own creation. He conjures up these striking locutions when an especial emphasis is required: for example, Nero is labelled as 'incredibilium cupitor.' When such turns occur (especially in character sketches or obituary notices) they suggest Sallust, himself the great 'novator verborum.'"

Thus Syme,¹ writing on the style of the *Annals*. In a footnote to this passage, he glosses *cupitor* by observing that "the word has been employed effectively" in *Ann.* 12. 7. 2, *reperitus est unus talis matrimonii cupitor*. On this latter case, Furneaux remarked with singular inaccuracy that the noun (outside Tacitus) could only be found once in Apuleius (giving no reference).

Oddly enough, Syme did not notice, either here or in his subsequent (728-32) appendix on Sallustian language in Tacitus, what was surely the inspiration for *incredibilium cupitor*, namely Sallust's description (*Cat.* 5. 5) of Catiline with its culminating *vastus animus immoderata, incredibilia, nimis alta semper cupiebat*. Tacitus here both varies and echoes his model in a recognisable way, achieving novelty and compression by use of *cupitor*, either his own coinage or a rarity he had unearthed somewhere (the *Historiae* of Sallust might be a fair bet). This conclusion accords with Syme's general doctrine on the subtle technique of Tacitean use of Sallust in the *Annals*.

Elsewhere (723), Syme includes *cupitor* in a list of nouns ending in *-or* in the *Annals* which he claims "recur in writers of late antiquity." This is misleading to the point of error.² True, two late writers do employ the term, namely Martianus Capella 6. 589 and (more to the point) the anonymous composer of the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, who (45. 5)

¹R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) I 342.

²For the statistics that follow, I draw on the *TLL* (4. 1435) and the *Index Apuleianus* of W. A. Oldfather and others (Middletown, CT 1934) 97.

stigmatises the emperor Valentinian as *infectus vitiis maximeque avaritiae; cuius cupitor ipse fuit acer . . .* This may establish the author (or his source) as both word fancier and devotee of Tacitus. But the writer most addicted to *cupitor* was Apuleius, hardly a representative of late antiquity. Some might infer a touch of *Africitas* from this. At all events, Apuleius has the word at *Met.* 3. 19 and 7. 11, at *Fl.* 17. 8, and at *Pl.* 2. 2. 11 and (accepting³ Thomas' emendation for the mss. *cupidior*) also *Pl.* 2. 18. 16.

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³ The *Index Apuleianus* adduces the passage without qualms; in the *TLL* (which provides the bibliographical reference to Thomas), it is left open.