

This paper considers a central but scarcely considered aspect of Tacitus' rich *Dialogus de oratoribus*, the questions it raises concerning time. It demonstrates how the *Dialogus* enacts a contestation of the meanings of 'past' and 'present', and how, through problematizing notions of *saeculum*, the work responds to the ideology of periodization in its early Trajanic context.

Gordon Williams' attempt in 1978 (*Change and Decline*) to explain away Maternus' notably incohesive characterization by dividing the *Dialogus* into two different time frames, one Vespasianic, one Trajanic, convinced few. Yet his solution, however unsatisfactory, reflects chronological ambiguities embedded within a text which supports neither a wholly historicizing reading (C. O. Brink, *Hermes* 1993) nor the dehistoricizing assumptions which underpin much recent work. While scholarship has been preoccupied with the challenge of determining the date of composition and the dramatic date (cf. C. O. Brink, *HSCP* 1994; M. Beck, *RhM* 2001), the problematic internal relationship between the two remains overlooked.

This paper seeks to throw into relief, rather than to resolve, the chronological tensions inherent in the *Dialogus*. The debate is explicitly anchored in a Vespasianic setting; yet Tacitus introduces the *Dialogus* to his recipient and audience as an artefact of 'our times' (*nostra aetas* and *haec tempora* are used no fewer than four times in *Dial.* 1), not of some discrete past age. Here already we see a contrast with the *Agricola*'s rigorous separation of the Flavian past from the *beatissimum saeculum* of Nerva and Trajan (*Ag.* 3.1, 44.4). Within the dramatic fiction of the dialogue, the present is a constant and emphatic point of reference, whether it be *hodie*, *tempora*, *aetas* or *saeculum nostrum*. The definition of this 'present', however, is a point at stake, in particular for Aper (whose views one cannot dismiss as merely those of a devil's advocate). Aper's elaborate arithmetical proof (*Dial.* 17) that his company are living in the same age as Cicero is a pivotal point in the dialogue, opening up and destabilizing the definition of *saeculum*. On the one hand, his assertion that the principate from 43 BC to the AD 70s is a single *saeculum* (*ne diuidatis saeculum*, *Dial.* 17.6) denies any dynastic break between Julio-Claudians and Flavians; on the other, the slicing of this period into a calculated catalogue of reigns emphasizes the fragmentary nature of the whole. Further, Aper's refusal to relegate Cicero to a distinct *saeculum* simultaneously challenges and confirms the notion of an Augustan watershed between republic and principate.

After demonstrating the key role of this crucial intervention by Aper in framing the *Dialogus*' central disputation over the states of pre- and post-modernity, the paper sets the debate in the work's imperial context. As can be quickly demonstrated, *saeculum* is a political buzzword of renewal, accompanying regime change between and within dynasties ever since Augustus' inaugural project: it is prominent, for example, in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Calpurnius Siculus (whether Neronian or Severan), and Statius and Martial on Domitian's *ludi saeculares*. At the turn of the second century, Pliny insistently demarcates the Domitianic *saeculum prius* from the new age, as does Tacitus not only in the *Agricola* but also in the *Historiae*, which functions in part as panegyric through its denigration of Flavian Rome. The *Dialogus*, by contrast, turns on the problematic of any attempt to define the present, and *qua* dialogue it opens, rather than closes, debate on the ideology of periodization. Even while subscribing to the Trajanic project of self-establishment in other works, Tacitus shows in the *Dialogus* how implicative schemes of chronology must be.