CHANGE OR DECLINE?
LITERATURE IN THE EARLY PRINCIPATE

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The entry by Peter Scott Noble in the second edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* under ‘LATIN, SILVER’ reads:

The period of Silver Latin is broadly from A.D. 17 to 130, but the literary decline which marks it began even before Livy’s death. The loss of political liberty and the practice of barren declamation led to a striving after novelty in which forced expression, exaggerated emphasis, antithesis, and epigram were cultivated for the express purpose of winning applause. Though the diction of Seneca is still fairly classical, all these faults abound in his works, and thereafter the same vein of rhetoric runs through the literature, reaching its height in Tacitus, the greatest of Silver writers. Quintilian has well summarized its faults when he says (book 8 proem) ‘nihil iam proprium placet, dum parum creditur disertum, quod et alius dixisset’ and ‘tum demum ingeniosi scilicet, si ad intelligendos nos opus sit ingenio’.1

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this type of negative evaluation has pervaded scholarly criticism of early imperial literature. The first detail that will strike some readers about the *OCD* entry is the use of the epithet ‘Silver’ to suggest the inferiority of literature written after Vergil and Horace, a subjective rather than rational value judgement, and therefore a misleading label.2 As C.S. Lewis notes,3 the use of the term ‘Silver’ has done great harm to the literature of the Principate. Evident earlier this century in J. Wight Duff’s assertion that the ‘appropriate epithet of “Silver” concedes the classical superiority of the Golden age’,4 in W.C. Summer’s view that there was a ‘definite decline in taste and freshness’,5 and in H.J. Rose’s comment that the literature of the ‘Silver Age’ consisted of ‘second-rate work’,6 this prejudicial attitude toward literature of the first century AD exists right up to the present day.7 No less a critic than Gordon Williams entitles his discussion of ‘Silver’ literature *Change and Decline*,8 while H. MacL. Currie asserts of this literature, ‘Change ... and eventually a decline did set in’.9 Other contemporary scholars such as Richard Jenkyns and T.A. Dorey continue to insist on the utility of the
label ‘Silver’ even as they recognise the dangers and inappropriateness of its applications. ¹⁰

What are the defining characteristics of this ‘Silver’ literature, according to the *OCD* entry?: ‘forced expression, exaggerated emphasis, antithesis, and epigram’—in short, an alleged artificiality of expression, similar to the charge brought against poetry of the same period by Encolpius in Petronius’ *Satyricon* (2). Modern scholars¹¹ have helped to popularise the concepts of mannerism and the baroque in describing the stylistic qualities that reflect the general change in accent from the poetry of the Republic.¹² Stylistic elements such as hyperbole, allusiveness, anaphora, metaphor, paradox, ‘point’, epigram, neatness, conceit, antithesis, parataxis and concision help to produce the defining characteristics of the declamatory style¹³ employed by the postclassical poets—vivid dramatic narrative, elaborate description, the expansion of ideas, clever and piquant expression, and various rhetorical and emotional effects. Williams alleges that the following defects in style constitute the defining characteristics of postclassical literature: excessive imitation of earlier writers; overexpansiveness of ideas; the breakdown in genre distinctions and merging of prose and poetry; the tendency toward episodic composition to the detriment of the larger work; overuse of ready-made poetic ideas; and the misuse of rhetoric in the composition of poetry.¹⁴ In fact, it is not at all apparent that some of the basic qualities mentioned by Williams are faults. A modern scholar such as Williams has a markedly different aesthetic from that possessed by a Roman audience in the early Principate. Such an audience, possessing at least a reasonable measure of academic learning, literary astuteness and aesthetic sensibility (cf. Tac. *Dial.* 19), would have expected a writer to adapt earlier literary themes and motifs to serve a new purpose; given the appropriateness of the expansion of an idea, it would have considered such expansion a virtue rather than a vice; the experimentation with genres and cross-fertilisation of poetry and prose are indications of a vibrant literary culture; episodic composition need not (and usually does not) preclude dramatic and thematic relevance to the whole of a work of this period; and rhetoric, which is indispensable to any poetic composition, was unencumbered by the modern prejudice of its antithesis to poetry. It should be remembered that the aesthetic these factors represent was much admired by the leading figures of the anti-Ciceronian movement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ovid, Lucan, Seneca, Pliny and Tacitus—not Vergil, Cicero and Livy—served as models of style in poetry, prose and historical writing during these centuries.

The restrictive political atmosphere in the early Principate generally did little to encourage writers toward a spontaneous treatment of theme and subject matter.¹⁵ In part their emphasis on style and treatment rather than subject matter was a natural consequence of the compulsion they felt
to avoid subjects that might impinge upon imperial sensibilities. Ovid, Seneca and Lucan all offended their emperors in various ways and suffered banishment or death as a result. Augustus' banishment of Ovid to Tomis for a 'carmen' and an 'error' (Ov. *Trist.* 2.207) is well known, though the work he refers to is unclear. The jealous reactions of Caligula and Nero to their literary rivals exemplifies the aesthetic controversy of the postclassical period. Seneca's popularity aroused the enmity of Caligula, who scornfully remarked that he composed 'commissiones meras', was 'harenam... sine calce', and threatened him with death (Suet. *Calig.* 53.2; Cass. Dio 59.19.7; Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 59.19). Nero became extremely jealous of Lucan's talents; this may have incited the poet to conspire against the emperor in vain (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.49; Suet. *Luc.*). Other writers suffered under the emperors. Cremutius Cordus offended Tiberius by praising Brutus and calling Cassius the last of the Romans (Tac. *Ann.* 4.34; cf. 4.31; Suet. *Tib.* 61.6). Sextius Paconianus lampooned Tiberius and was strangled in prison (Tac. *Ann.* 6.39; Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 67.22). A poet was put to death for slandering Agamemnon (Suet. *Tib.* 61.3). Even a few ambiguous lines during the reign of Tiberius were enough to warrant death, as when Mamercus Scaurus was accused of adapting Euripidean verse to impugn the emperor's character (Tac. *Ann.* 6.29; Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 68.24). Similarly an ambiguous line in Atellan farce written during the reign of Caligula condemned its writer to the arena (Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 59.20). This oppressive political atmosphere was further intensified by the reaction of the Flavian emperors to the excesses of Nero's regime and the conflicts of AD 68-69. Domitian acted swiftly against any real, imagined or actual offence against his person or rule. Hermogenes was executed and his copyists crucified for unflattering innuendoes in his History (Suet. *Dom.* 10.1). Arulenus was executed for publishing panegyrics upon the Stoic senators Pactus Thrasea and the elder Helvidius Priscus and describing them as 'sanctissimi uiri' (*Dom.* 10.3; cf. Cass. Dio 67.13.2; Tac. *Agr.* 2.1), while the younger Helvidius was put to death for allegedly rebuking in a comic afterpiece the divorce of Jupiter from his wife under the characters of Paris and Oenone (Suet. *Dom.* 10.4).

Naturally these political circumstances affected the scope and type of literary activity. Many of the themes and moods of works by poets were relevant to the contemporary situation, although this was less obviously so than in the past because of the choice of ostensibly innocuous mythological or historically remote subjects. Evident in the executions and banishments that marked the reigns of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors, the gloomy, violent and inquisitorial atmosphere that existed pervades and infects much of the literature of the period, which itself comes to serve as a critical commentary on contemporary Roman society. To Williams this changed political atmosphere resulted in a failure to maintain the standards of an earlier age:
Some [writers] made adaptations with success; but, in general, the proportion of decline involved in the adjustment of values steadily increased until the sense of belonging to a living tradition was lost, and Roman writers, vainly imitating Greek predecessors, groped back into the most remote past to find, at any price, some shred of novelty. That is not just change: that is decline.¹⁹

Implicit in this statement is the modern assumption that the propensity to imitation among the writers of the postclassical age can be adduced as evidence of literature being in a state of decline. A writer did not merely look to his precursors and contemporaries for exempla but emulated their works by modifying the prevailing theme or structure or by employing a dissimilar style in order to suit a new context and to create a specific effect suited to his artistic purpose. He would have expected contemporary audiences to discern the sources of his adaptations and to grasp the thematic significance of the changes. One who attempts to challenge and improve upon a literary predecessor in this way does not automatically consign his work to an inferior status. For Quintilian there is no doubt that an important part of art lies in imitation (‘artis pars magna continetur imitatione’, Inst. 10.2.1). Postclassical literature is no more mimetic than literature of the classical period. Just as an Augustan poet such as Vergil challenges Homer, Theocritus and others by using the associations that his readers bring to bear upon his poetry, so a Flavian poet such as Statius challenges Vergil, Homer and a whole host of ancient poets by reworking their material in order to create new meaning consistent with his artistic purpose. This practice per se does not attest to a decline of literary eloquence.²⁰

Although the atmosphere in the early Principate did little to encourage the writer to treat a contemporary national theme in an imaginative and persuasive manner with a deep sense of personal involvement, the political circumstances did not necessarily militate against a high standard of literary achievement. The emperors, particularly the Flavians, fostered literature even as they suppressed it. Undoubtedly the spectre of an emperor such as Domitian played its part in encouraging writers toward new treatments of traditional genres, notably epideictic and epic, but this did not affect adversely the general standard of literature produced. Given the political situation and requirements of the period, it is scarcely surprising that new literary trends emerged, for the writer was compelled to adapt to the changing circumstances and demands of his age in order to achieve success. The need for the artist to change with the times is a key theme in the vigorous apology that Aper conducts of the new rhetoric in the Dialogus de Oratoribus. Although Aper’s comments on styles, types and standards changing with the times concern the art of oratory (16–23), they are just as relevant to the sphere of literary activity. Modern critics frequently cite
the views of Messalla and Maternus as evidence of Tacitus' feelings on an alleged decline of eloquence. But it is more probable, given the terse stylistic qualities of his later prose works, that Tacitus sympathised with the arguments of Aper on the necessity of a change in style from Ciceronian extravagance, diffuseness and redundancy (cf. 18, 20, 22f.). In the view of Aper the audience now was more sophisticated and knowledgeable (19.5) and therefore demanded a vivid and ornate style instead of what he deems is the comparatively stern and unadorned style of a figure such as Cicero (20.3). Aper insists there is no clear division between ancient and modern oratory (17–19); styles and trends change according to the conditions and prevailing tastes of the age (18f.; cf. Sen. Ep. 114.13); and there are various types of excellence in any given period (Dialog. 18; cf. Sen. Con. 3 pr. 11).

Naturally this lack of a clear division between present and past styles of oratory also applies to literature. One of the problems with the OCD entry cited at the beginning of this section is the artificial restriction of 'Silver' literature to AD 17 to 130, which suggests that the style of literature written during this period can be easily distinguished from that which preceded (and followed) it. Nothing could be further from the truth. During the late Republic and early Principate there was much controversy and debate about literary styles. The writings of Horace, Persius, Juvenal, the elder Seneca, Quintilian, Petronius, Tacitus and Pliny are replete with references to and discussions about the various forms, functions and styles of literature. The arguments of Aper serve as a strong defence of postclassical tendencies in literature and in the process refute the notion of an alleged decline in eloquence. Tacitus, like Aper, realised that language must change not only to prosper but to survive, as his own works bear witness. In fact, the pointed style of his historical writings is best seen as a response to the expansiveness of the classical style he employs in the Dialogus. The same can be said of Pliny, whose Panegyricus represents a similar evolution in style from his earlier Epistulae. Not only was there a diversity and range of styles during the late Republican period and early Principate, but individual writers employed different styles according to their particular purpose at hand and stage of development.

Just as there was no unanimity among writers on matters of style in the early Principate, there was no clear agreement on who were the best writers. While Bavius and Maevius became the targets of Vergil (Ecl. 3.9f.), as did Maevius and the elegists of Horace (Epod. 10; Carm. 1.33, respectively), even the works of Vergil and Horace, 'golden' age figures canonised by modern scholars, were attacked or disapproved of by contemporary audiences (Suet. Poet. 43–46 [Vergil]; cf. Hor. Ep. 19 [Horace]). According to Aper, some of his contemporaries preferred Lucilius to Horace and Lucretius to Vergil (Dialog. 23.2). Martial compares Lucan favourably with Vergil in his Epigrams (7.23), while in Petronius' Satyricon, a work from the same pe-
period, Lucan is condemned for writing historical epic (118). Pliny rates Tacitus highly (Ep. 7.33.1), while Quintilian praises the histories of Aufidius Bassus, Servilius Nonianus and Cremutius Cordus (Inst. 10.102-04). Whatever views the Romans held of their literature, Augustan epic and even Cicero would surely demand reevaluation if the epics of Bavius and Maevius (cf. Verg. Ecl. 3.9; Hor. Epod. 10) and the tragedies of Cicero (cf. Quint. Inst. 11.1.24; Juv. Sat. 10.122) were to be uncovered today. As for the surviving corpus of Roman literature, Tacitus as an historian compares favourably with Livy; Suetonius as a biographer with Nepos; Pliny as an epistolographer with Cicero; Juvenal as a satirist with Horace; Martial as an epigrammatist with Catullus; and Petronius as a novelist is without parallel. Of course, a different set of comparisons could be adduced to suggest the inferiority of postclassical literature. There were bad writers in the postclassical age, just as there are in any period of literary achievement. But the more skilful ones created some of the finest expressive and descriptive passages in Roman literature.

The author of the treatise Περὶ τῶν ἐξαίρεσεων laments what he considers to be the loss of a special type of eloquence he describes as ‘sublime’ and the world-wide dearth of literature (44.1). A modern scholar such as Williams, who ascribes this treatise to the third century AD Cassius Longinus, nevertheless is quick to seize upon this statement as support for his belief that the first century AD was an age of a decline in literature. Certainly the early Principate witnessed a change in aesthetic sensibilities brought about by various political, social and artistic factors. Although these factors defy ready definition and explanation, this change in aesthetic appears to have been a response in part not only to the oppressive political environment and a reflection of changed social conditions, but also a natural extension of the classical norm and an anxious reaction to the influences of the Augustan classical achievement. Although the differences between the postclassical aesthetic and those of the classical norm cannot be described in absolute terms, the amalgam of the aforementioned factors aided in the development of a complex, ornate, and paratactic style whose appeal depended on the finely tuned rhetorical sensibilities of a sophisticated and knowledgeable contemporary audience.

It is true that no less a postclassical poet than Statius remarks that he falls short of Vergil in the composition of his epic (Theb. 12.816f.). But we would be well advised not to take this and Roman self-evaluations attesting to a decline in eloquence too seriously, especially when these statements are made with considerable articulacy. Aper in the Dialogus makes precisely this point in respect of oratory, insisting that Messalla’s predilection for past standards blinds him to his own eloquence and that of his contemporaries (15.1). An age so expressive of its own shortcomings is likely to be much less so in fact. Like writers of any period, those of the post-
classical age must be judged on their own merits. This is not merely an exercise where the critic is reduced to finding ‘virtue in any writer (given a sufficient “understanding” of him)’. Modern scholars who insist upon viewing postclassicism as an artistic manifestation of an age of declining eloquence inevitably come to an unbalanced and injudicious assessment of its literature. There are always critics in any period of artistic endeavour who find it comforting to imagine a past ‘Golden Age’ (unlike their own time?) when writers employed a grand style appropriate to the expression of elevated sentiments. Change meant decline for those Romans with a traditional bent such as Quintilian, who advocates a return to the classical style, just as it will continue to suggest that for some critics in the future. Yet is it not more accurate and far less judgemental to suggest that literature in the early Principate did not so much decline as change?

NOTES

2. The use of a value-free term such as ‘postclassical’ or ‘early imperial’ is infinitely more preferable than the word ‘Silver’. Of course ‘postclassical’, like ‘Silver’, is a relative, not absolute term; therefore, ‘postclassical’ too has its problems in application, since it is a most useful word to employ in referring not only to the literature of the first century AD but also to the writings of a late imperial poet such as Claudian.
7. There are important exceptions to this attitude, for example, E. Cizek’s L’époque de Néron et ses controverses idéologiques, Leiden 1972, which supports the principal hypothesis of this article.
12. Notwithstanding the difficulties in making appropriate use of the terms ‘mannerism’ and ‘baroque’, they continue to be used by many scholars to describe the style
peculiar to postclassicism. This is acceptable if we make a preliminary distinction between two concepts of mannerism—mannerism proper, pertaining to the sixteenth and seventeenth century phenomenon, and universal mannerism, pertaining to the trend than can arise in any field of artistic endeavour during any age, such as the postclassical period.

13. In a historical and technical sense the descriptive epithet 'declamatory' is probably a far more accurate and legitimate expression than the labels 'mannerist' or 'baroque' to use in referring to the stylistic tendencies of the first century AD in poetry, since the use of the appellation 'declamatio' and its variants would have automatically evoked in imperial minds certain characteristics of style that every man of letters would have associated with the practice of these disciplines.

14. Williams (above, n. 8), 193–271.


16. The 'carmen' has usually been considered to be the *Ars Amatoria*, but I think it is more likely, or at least as likely, that it was the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's epic was too referential—witness the obvious parody of an imperial assembly in *Met.* 10.163ff., where Jupiter, associated closely with Augustus in imperial ideology, presides authoritatively, indeed oppressively, without a trace of dissent, over a divine assembly—and, unlike Vergil's *Aeneid*, it certainly had no redeeming value as a panegyric epic attesting (even superficially) to Rome's greatness.


18. On the literary rift between Nero and Lucan, see G.K. Gresseth, 'The Quarrel Between Lucan and Nero', *CPh* 52 (1957) 24–27; Cizek (above, n. 7), 170ff.

19. Williams (above, n. 8), 5.


21. E.g., Williams (above, n. 8), 27ff., esp. 49–51; T. Luce, 'Tacitus', in *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome* 2, New York 1982, 1014.

22. Williams (above, n. 8), 17–25.

23. Cited from the jacket cover of Williams (above, n. 8).
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