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EMPEROR'S "ARS RECUSANDI" IN BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE*

ASKO TIMONEN

In his *De Vita Caesarum* (Iul. 79,1), Suetonius gives an example of Julius Caesar's "arrogance". The biographer relates that Caesar dismissed two tribunes of the people (Epidius Marullus, Caesetius Flavus) for a minor offence. As he returned to the city from the Albanus Mons, where the *feriae Latinae* had been celebrated, someone in the crowd set a laurel wreath, bound with a royal white fillet, on the head of his statue. The tribunes ordered the fillet to be removed quickly and the offender to be imprisoned. Caesar dismissed the tribunes because they had rejected the very symbol of kingship so crudely, or, as the biographer continues, they had not given Caesar himself the opportunity to reject it and in this manner to earn deserved credit. Suetonius insists that the latter was Caesar's own version of the incident (*ut ferebat, ereptam sibi gloriam recusandi*). We have good reason to suppose that this was not the case: Suetonius presents Caesar, in his zeal for *gloria recusandi*, as a clumsy and frivolous aspirant for kingship.¹

During the principate, the refusal of *dominatus unius*, or of imperial honours and titles, were acts of propaganda that could be interpreted as signs of a ruler's *moderatio* and *civilitas*.² Both in Roman politics and historio-

* An earlier version of this article, "*Gloria recusandi* in Roman biographies of rulers", was delivered in Helsinki during the colloquium "Literature and Politics in Antiquity", organized by University of Helsinki and the Jagiellonian University of Cracow, in May 1992.

¹ Cf. *ibid.* 79,2: *neque ex eo infamiam affectati etiam regii nominis discutere valuit*.

² Especially *recusatio imperii*, as a political phenomenon, has been comprehensively studied by J. Béranger: *Le refus du pouvoir* (Recherches sur l'aspect idéologique du principat), *MH* 5 (1948) 178-196; *Recherches sur l'aspect idéologique du principat*, *Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft* 6 (1953) 137-169. See also: A. van Genep, *Le rite du refus*, *ARW* 11 (1907), discussing the refusals of some popes; E. Rawson, *Caesar's Heritage: Hellenistic Kings and their Roman Equals*, *JRS* 65 (1975) 148-159; A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King*, *JRS* 72 (1982) 32-48; A.V. van Stekelenburg, *De Redevoeringen bij Cassius Dio*, Delft 1971, 121-129;

graphy "*ars recusandi*" seems to have been a roundabout appeal to the senate's supremacy over the *princeps*.³ In imperial biographies, particularly the presentation of *recusatio imperii*, a would-be emperor's public display of "unwillingly" taking the dominating position, serves as the author's appraisal of the person's attitude to the substance of ruling power. To be not greedy for power was considered as a qualification in statemanship, a qualification which the historians presupposed the ruler to possess.⁴

Referring to interpretations by historians,⁵ my intention in this paper is to survey "*ars recusandi*" of Roman rulers in the biographical narrative of Suetonius and the *Historia Augusta* (HA).⁶ I shall make some observations on its proportion in the individual biographies, and then, try to consider and compare the function of the *recusationes* in the collections in corpore.

A. Jakobson-H. Cotton, *Caligula's Recusatio Imperii*, *Historia* 34 (1985) 497-503; M. Reinhold-P.M. Swan, *Cassius Dio's Assessment of Augustus*, in *Between Republic and Empire, Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, ed. by K.A. Raaflaub and M. Toher, Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford 1990, 166-168, 170 n.70, 173 n.84. I shall not study the possible "roots" of *recusatio*. A good start for such studies are e.g. Béranger (1953), 149ff., P. Martin, *L'idée de royauté à Rome*, Clermont-Ferrand 1982 (see his index, s.v. *odium regni*) and Wallace-Hadrill, esp. 37-44 (for Ed. Meyer's parallel between Syracusan Agathocles [Diod. 19,1-9] and Augustus, see *ibid.* 44 and n. 99).

³ I agree with Jakobson and Cotton, 502-503: "nevertheless its emergence and persistence are a tribute to the republican past" and with Wallace-Hadrill, 37: "it is a gesture designed to substantiate an elaborate pretence that things are not as they seem".

⁴ Cf. the *Historia Augusta* which puts words into Severus Alexander's mouth (Alex. 19,1): *dicens invitos, non ambientes in re p. conlocandos*; see also *ibid.* 48,1: *cum quidam Ovinius Camillus senator antiquae familiae delicatissimus rebellare voluisset tyrannidem adfectans eique nuntiatum esset ac statim probatum, ad Palatium eum rogavit eique gratias egit, quod curam rei p., quae recusantibus bonis inponeretur, sponte reciperet*, and *ibid.*, Tac. 2,3: *ut discant, qui regna cupiunt, non raptum ire imperia sed mereri*; see Béranger 1953, 159.

⁵ *Recusatio imperii*, for instance, is a literary commonplace in Roman historiography; cf. the list of in Béranger 1953, 139-140.

⁶ The following restriction must be taken account of in this treatise: the problem concerning the *Historia Augusta* and its origin. We do not know precisely who the author (or the authors) of these biographies were. Nor do we know their sources. However, the text itself is a document that can be approximately dated to the fourth (or the fifth) century A.D, for the problem, see: P. Soverini, *Scrittori della Storia Augusta*, vol. 1, Torino 1983, 52. Two remarkable studies on the probable sources of the HA, by T.D. Barnes: *The Lost Kaisergeschichte and the Latin Historical Tradition*, Bonn 1970; *The Sources of the Historia Augusta*, Coll. Latomus 155, Brussels 1978.

De Vita Caesarum: balanced narrative

Caesar, Augustus and Tiberius

The incident at the Latin Festival exemplifies Suetonius' critique on Caesar's comprehension of his own position in the state. Although he showed self-restraint and was merciful towards his suppressed enemies (Iul. 75,1), Caesar abused his power and thus ruined rule and his life (ibid. 76,1: *et abusus dominatione et iure caesus existimetur*). He was guilty of extravagance in flaunting his position, arrogant and insolent to the senate and to the state. He was suspected of seeking kingship and immortality and honours to be bestowed on him which were "too great for a mortal man".⁷ In this context of his ambitions for kingship, Caesar's refusal of the signs of power, especially of the diadem offered him by Antonius (ibid. 79,2) motivated the biographer to indicate the insincerity in the dictator's intentions and motives.

In contrast, Suetonius' attitude to the *consensus* propaganda of Augustus, such as his ideas for restoring the Republic (Aug. 28,1)⁸ and his modesty in building shrines in his own name, is far from the evil critique against Caesar. In describing Augustus' refusal of the title *Pater patriae* Suetonius succeeds in reconstructing a "glory effect" by the use of direct oration and by an emphasis on *consensus*.⁹ However, this only balances the

⁷ Iul. 76,1: *non enim honores modo nimios recepit: continuum consulatum, perpetuam dictaturam praefecturamque morum, insuper praenomen Imperatoris, cognomen Patris patriae, statuam inter reges, suggestum in orchestra; sed et ampliora etiam humano fastigio decerni sibi passus est; cf. also ibid. 78,1: verum praecipuam et exitiabilem sibi invidiam hinc maxime movit. adeuntis se cum plurimis honorificentissimisque decretis universos patres conscriptos sedens pro aede Veneris Genetricis exceptit.*

⁸ The most impressive example of making the *recusatio* and *consensus* propaganda is probably Augustus' Res Gestae: Augustus claims that he refused the dictatorship and the extension of the consulship (RG 5). And, which is, in my opinion, the real Augustan *recusatio imperii* (flavoured with *gloria*), he "transferred the authority to the senate and the Roman people" (RG 34,1). Cf. Dio 53,6,1-7,4; J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *The Settlement of 27 B.C.*, in C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, vol. 4, Coll. Latomus 196, Brussels 1986, 345-365; Reinhold-Swan, 166 n. 52.

⁹ Aug. 58: *Patris patriae cognomen universi repentino maximoque consensu detulerunt ei: prima plebs legatione Antium missa; dein, quia non recipiebat, ineunti Romae spectacula frequens et laureata; mox in curia senatus, neque decreto neque adclamatione, sed per Valerium Messalam. is mandantibus cunctis: "quod bonum", inquit, "faustumque sit tibi domuique tuae, Caesar Auguste! sic enim nos perpetuam felicitatem rei p. et laeta huic precari existimamus: senatus te consentiens cum populo R. consalutat patriae patrem." cui lacrimans respondit Augustus his verbis – ipsa enim, sicut Messalae, posui –: "compos factus votorum meorum, p. c., quid habeo aliud deos immortales precari, quam ut hunc consensum vestrum ad ultimum finem vitae mihi perferre liceat?"*

description of the emperor's character, for earlier the author even censures Augustus for his greediness for the consulship.¹⁰ Accordingly, the most forceful design in Augustus' character described by Suetonius is, undoubtedly, the emperor's realistic consideration of ruling power.¹¹

Suetonius is at his most critical against Tiberius' "staging" a refusal of the imperial powers. He says that Tiberius declined the title of the emperor for a long time *impudentissimo mimo* and that he accepted the empire "as though on compulsion, complaining of the burdensome slavery forced on him".¹²

The biographer does not mention any reasonable motives for Tiberius' modesty. In fact, Suetonius and the historian Tacitus take quite a different stand on Tiberius' refusal.¹³ If we are to believe the former, Tiberius' act of refusal was a poor political game. Suetonius criticizes the emperor's simulated, untrustworthy propaganda. Reading the *Annales* gives us a broader perspective. Though suspicious of the emperor's honesty,¹⁴ Tacitus describes Tiberius as uncertain and hesitating. *Recusatio* is a sign of Tiberius' anxiety about Germanicus' popularity. Despite his incredulity as to Tiberius' motives, Tacitus gives a possible reason for the emperor's modesty: he was cautious. It was enough for him "only" to ensure his position as first man of the state, not to compete with Germanicus for popularity. Accordingly, Tacitus' primary purpose was not to insult Tiberius, but to describe the political atmosphere at the time of the emperor's succession. Even Tacitus' criticism differs from that of Suetonius, for he also takes up for discussion the submission and inefficiency of the senators under Tiberius' rule.¹⁵

Suetonius, on the contrary, is not interested in such explanations. He only casts a shadow over Tiberius' political figure at the very beginning of his reign, which turns out to be a tyranny in its end. Consequently

¹⁰ Ibid. 26,1: *consulatum vicesimo aetatis anno invasit admotis hostiliter ad urbem legionibus missisque qui sibi nomine exercitus deposcerent.*

¹¹ See ibid. 28,1: *de reddenda re p. bis cogitavit... sed reputans et se privatum non sine periculo fore...*

¹² Tib. 24,2: *tandem quasi coactus et querens miseram et onerosam iniungi sibi servitutem, recepit imperium.*

¹³ For Tiberius' *recusatio* in Tacitus, see Ann. 1,11 (cf. Dio 57,2,3-3,5). On his refusal and the techniques which Suetonius and Tacitus employed to express it, see J. Gasco, *Suétone historien*, Rome 1984, 263ff.

¹⁴ Ann. 4,9: *ad vana et totiens intrisa revolutus, de reddenda re publica utque consules seu quis alius regimen suscipere...*

¹⁵ Cf. ibid. 1-4; 7.

Suetonius, compared to Tacitus, exaggerates his description, because he intends to insult the emperor's reign as a whole.

The successors of Tiberius

The refusals of the emperors after Tiberius do not inspire Suetonius to discuss them at any length:

Claudius was modest and unassuming, for he refrained from accepting the title *Imperator* and refused excessive honours (Claud. 12,1). The message is laudatory here, even lacking in *gloria*. But there was, in my opinion, a farcical episode before he could announce his "*recusatio imperii*".¹⁶

As for Nero, Suetonius relates that the emperor refused only one of the many high honours that were heaped upon him, namely the title of father of his country, and this happened "*propter aetatem*", as he jeers at the emperor (Ner. 8).

The question arises as to whether Galb. 10,1 refers to Galba's refusal of the imperial powers. His speech from the tribunal, in which he deplored the state of the times and declared himself a governor who represented the senate and people of Rome, thus justifying his doings, suggests, in my opinion, a refusal to some degree.¹⁷ However, Suetonius explains Galba's "moderation" very prosaically, and also believably (ibid. 11): *sed supervenientibus ab urbe nuntiis ut occisum Neronem cunctosque in verba sua iurasse cognovit, deposita legati suscepit Caesaris appellationem iterque ingressus est paludatus ac dependente a cervicibus pugione ante pectus*.

Nor in the case of Otho does Suetonius take for granted the sincerity of the emperor's reluctance. He namely tells us that the emperor had explained (cf. *quasi*) in the senate that he was carried off into the streets and was forced to undertake the rule (Oth. 7,1): *dein vergente iam die ingressus senatum positaeque brevi oratione quasi raptus de publico et suscipere*

¹⁶ See Claud. 10,1: *imperium cepit quantumvis mirabili casu* (ff.). Even his "refusal" (ibid. 10,3) is in Suetonius, to my mind, somewhat farcical (see my underlines): *accitusque et ipse per tr. pl. in curiam ad suadenda quae viderentur vi se et necessitate teneri respondit*. For Claudius' consent, see ibid. 10,4: *verum postero die et senatu segniori in exequendis conatibus per taedium ac dissensionem diversa censentium et multitudine, quae circumstabat, unum rectorem iam et nominatim exposcente, armatos pro contione iurare in nomen suum passus est promisitque singulis quina dena sestertia, primus Caesarum fidem militis etiam praemio pigneratus*; cf. Dio 60,1,3a.

¹⁷ Naturally (because only hypothetical), not mentioned by Béranger 1953, 139; Plutarch (Galb. 5,2) and Dio (64,2,1) are more outspoken than Suetonius.

*imperium vi coactus gesturusque communi omnium arbitrio, Palatium petit.*¹⁸

As for Vitellius, Suetonius states that the emperor delayed accepting the title of *Augustus* and forever declined that of *Caesar*, but eagerly accepted the surname of *Germanicus* (Vit. 8,2). The context does not help in deciding whether these observations are a criticism or an impartial report. Despite his great hostility towards Vitellius, Suetonius relates the "acts" of the ruler's refusal dispassionately (Vit. 15,2-3): in his desperate situation under threat from Vespasianus, Vitellius, in vain, begs the soldiers and people to accept his resignation referring to his (earlier) refusal at the time of his accession.¹⁹ The soldiers and people do not let him retire. This is the prelude to his death and disgrace.

Vespasianus was an *exemplum moderationis* (Vesp. 12): *ceteris in rebus statim ab initio principatus usque ad exitum civilis et clemens, mediocritatem pristinam neque dissimulavit umquam ac frequenter etiam prae se tulit.*²⁰ The emperor assumed tribunician power and the title of *Pater patriae* after long deliberation (ibid.): *ac ne tribuniciam quidem potestatem statim nec patris patriae appellationem nisi sero recepit.*²¹

Suetonius' comments towards the rulers' *recusatio* propaganda varies from negative, distrustful or pointed (Caesar, Tiberius, Nero, Otho, Vitellius) to realistic (Augustus, Galba and Vespasianus [?]).²² Despite his bias against the refusals of, for instance, Caesar and Tiberius, Suetonius takes a reasonable stand in portraying their person. Suetonius strives to keep the details of a ruler's acts separate from those of his conduct and character,²³ and also gives somewhat conflicting evidence. This also applies

¹⁸ Cf. Plut. Galb. 25,2; Tac. Hist. 1,26; 29.

¹⁹ For his refusal, see Vit. 8,1: *subito a militibus e cubiculo raptus*; cf. Plut. Galb. 22,7.

²⁰ Cf. Tac. Hist. 2,80: *in ipso nihil tumidum, adrogans aut in rebus novis novum fuit.*

²¹ For his earlier efforts of *recusatio imperii* before soldiers, see Josephus, Bell. Iud. 1,24; 4, 601-604 (cf. Zonaras 11,16). For the role of Licinius Mucianus as the hesitating Vespasian's supporter, see Tac. Hist. 2, 76: *his pavoribus nutantem et alii legati amicique firmabant et Mucianus post multos secretosque sermones iam et coram ita locutus* (et sqq.); ibid. 2,78: Vespasian takes courage after a favourable divination; Béranger 1953, 139.

²² For the absence of *recusatio imperii* in dynastic successions, see Béranger 1953, 141-142; 148. There are no signs of Titus' and Domitian's refusal in their biographies. For Caligula, see 22,1ff.: the biographer tells of Caligula's lust for power and about his megalomania! But see Jakobson and Cotton, 497-503.

²³ For stylistic qualities of biography as a literary genre, see F. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form*, Hildesheim 1965 (Leipzig 1901), 1-10 [Suetonius' Caesares]; 270ff. [Historia Augusta]; C.H. Talbert, *Biographies of Philosophers and Rulers as Instruments of Religious Propaganda in Mediterranean*

to the above-mentioned realistic cases of *recusatio*.

Historia Augusta: pressing for ideology

The same cannot be said about the *Historia Augusta*. The staging of refusal in the HA differs clearly from Suetonius' style of writing. Only the lives of Hadrian, Pius and Marcus Aurelius resemble to some degree Suetonius' Caesares. In these the narrative is full of moderation: no speeches, and, equally, no strong emphasis on the emperors' propaganda. There is neither an exaggeration of the glory nor a critique against *recusatio* propaganda in these three biographies, only slight echoes of the rulers' reluctance to accept power or the signs of power.²⁴ Furthermore, the balance between narration and chronological structure is not disturbed by mixing various themes.²⁵

The rest of the lives in the compilation are not as balanced as the above-mentioned ones. Following the genre of each, the HA biographies have two distinct, and quite contradictory attitudes towards *recusatio*: praise (including glorification) and censure. Praise is most extensively brought up in the lives of Gordian, Tacitus and Probus which I shall discuss in detail in this paper. Laudatory tendencies are discernible also, to some degree, in the life of Pertinax and, with loftiness, in the lives of Clodius Albinus and Severus Alexander.²⁶ In praising the refusal of certain emperors, the HA

Antiquity, ANRW II 16.2 (1978) 1619-1620; Gascou, 685-688; See also A. Momigliano, criticizing Leo's classifications, in his *Development of Greek Biography*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, 10; 19-20; 45-46.

²⁴ Hadr. 6,2-4; Pius 5,2: *aliis honoribus refutatis*; ibid. 6,4: *imperatorium fastigium ad summam civilitatem deduxit*; ibid. 6,6: *patris patriae nomen delatum a senatu, quod primo distulerat...*; ibid. 10,1: *mensem Septembrem atque Octobrem Antoninum atque Faustinum appellandos decrevit senatus, sed id Antoninus respuit*; Aur. 5,3: *ubi autem comperit se ab Hadriano adoptatum, magis est deterritus quam laetatus iussusque in Hadriani privatam domum migrare invitus de maternis hortis recessit. cumque ab eo domestici quaerent, cur tristis in adoptionem regiam transiret, disputavit, quae mala in se contineret imperium*; ibid. 7,5: *post excessum divi Pii a senatu coactus regimen publicum capere*; ibid. 9,1-3.

²⁵ In this respect, these three lives resemble, to some degree, the lives in Suetonius' Caesares; see above n. 23.

²⁶ Pert. 15,7-8 *horruisse autem illum imperium epistula docet*, repeats the topic of ibid. 13,1: *imperium et omnia imperialia sic horruit, ut sibi semper ostenderet displicere* and ibid. 13,3: *voluit etiam imperium deponere atque ad privatam vitam redire*; of these only Pert. 15,7-8 can be indisputably interpreted as a hint at his refusal reported clearly by Dio (73,1,4), Herodian (2,3,3-4), and *Epitome de Caesaribus* (18,1); cf. Eutropius (8,16): *ex senatus consulto imperare iussus*. For the encomiastic presentation of Clodius Albinus' *recusatio imperii*, see Alb. 3,2-3, cf. ibid. 6,4-5 and 13,9-10. Severus Alexander's refusal

exaggerates, extends the narration and emphasizes more than Suetonius the "political" stance. The HA intentionally emphasizes the scene of the refusal: the dialogue between the individual and those who invite him to become the emperor, his efforts to appeal to his old age and, finally, his agreeing under compulsion.

On the other hand, the disapproved *recusantes* are stigmatized for their staging of reluctance and propaganda (Macrinus), or for false apology (Hadrian) or the refusal is nonchalanced (Septimius Severus)²⁷. The cases of Macrinus and Hadrian will be treated below.

Praised and glorified refusals: Gordian, Tacitus, Probus

The HA lives, *Maximinorum Duo* and *Gordiani Tres*, dramatize the accession of M. Antonius Gordianus, the proconsul of Africa in 237 A.D. Under Maximinus Thrax (235-238 A.D.), disturbances broke out among the peasants of Africa, caused by the burden of excessive taxation. The immediate cause of the revolt, which raised Gordian to the position of emperor, was the unscrupulous policy of one of Maximinus' procurators who attempted to confiscate wealthy landowners' property in the province. Consequently, some young nobles formed a conspiracy and, supported by labourers from their estates, assassinated the procurator. Their intention was, however, to give their enterprise an official character and to rouse the whole province in revolt against Maximinus Thrax.²⁸ Accordingly they approached Gordian, the proconsul of Africa who was living in Thysdrus, and invited him to become emperor.

According to the HA, Gordian was forced to assume the purple. His old age – he was already in his eighty-first year²⁹ – "guaranteed" his

of the names of Antoninus and Magnus is related as a lengthy dialogue between him and the senate (Alex. 6-11).

²⁷ In my opinion, it is impossible to include the author's nonchalant attitude to Septimius Severus' refusal (Sev. 5,1: *repugnans imperator est appellatus*) in the categories of praise or censure; Severus' biography is neither encomium nor invective.

²⁸ This view of the spontaneous revolt and its turning into an official coup is supported by Herodian (7,5,1ff.), followed in the modern accounts of W. Ensslin (CAH xii) 76-77, of G.M. Bersanetti, *Studi sull'imperatore Massimino il Trace*, Roma 1940, 66ff., of T. Kotula, *L'Insurrection des Gordiens et l'Afrique romaine*, Eos 50 (1959-1960) 203-204 and of R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, Oxford 1971, 175-176 ["an accident"]. A coup d'état conducted from Rome? see P.W. Townsend, *The Revolution of AD 238: The Leaders and their Aims*, YCS 14 (1955) 50-51; 64-65; 80; For the motives against Maximinus Thrax, see Bersanetti, 55-71, A. Bellezza, *Massimino il Trace*, Genova 1964, 143-180 and K. Dietz, *Senatus contra principem*, München 1980, 56ff.

²⁹ Gord. 9,1: *erat autem iam octogenarius*; for his age, see also Herodian 7,5,2; D.

sincerity and suitability to rule. According to the text, Gordian was *senex venerabilis*³⁰ who first refused power braving soldiers' lances and who later tried unassumingly to convince the senators of his unsuitability to occupy such a demanding position. Gordian's idyll of retirement was definitively and shockingly broken, for the rebels had found him lying on a couch (trying to get some rest after jurisdiction). They wrapped Gordian straightaway in the purple, but he would have none of it and threw himself on the ground, in vain.³¹ After this "unofficial" *recusatio*, Gordian "officially" explained in his letter to the senate how he gave his consent to rule (Maxim. 16,2):

"invitum me, p.c., iuvenes, quibus Africa tuenda commissa est, ad imperium vocarunt. sed intuitu vestri necessitatem libens sustineo. vestrum est aestimare, quid velitis. nam ego usque ad senatus iudicium incertus et varius fluctuabo."

In spite of the *nobilis servitus* idealism³² in this episode, the HA also offers a realistic reason for Gordian's motives: at first the aged proconsul declined the invitation of the young nobles, but, realising that his reluctance would mean immediate death, he finally consented and was duly proclaimed emperor. It was dangerous to decline³³ for not only did the favoured individual risk his life at the hands of the excited rebels, but he would ever after have been suspected by the actual ruler as a pretender.³⁴ Thus Gordian

Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle*, Darmstadt 1990, 188.

³⁰ For this theme, see Maximin. 13,6: *Gordianum senem, virum gravissimum*, Gord. 8,5: *senex venerabilis*, *ibid.* 11,7: *Gordiani senis felicitatem atque prudentiam*.

³¹ For dramatization, see Gord. 8,5: *his actis prope ventum est ad oppidum Tysdrum, inventusque senex venerabilis post iuris dictionem iacens in lectulo, qui circumfusus purpura humi se abiicit ac retractans elevatus est*; Maximin. 14,2: *sed cum viderent auctores caedis eius acrioribus remediis sibi subveniendum esse, Gordianum proconsulem, virum, ut diximus, venerabilem, natu grandiolem, omni virtutum genere florentem, ab Alexandro ex senatus consulto in Africam missum, reclamantem et se terrae adfligentem, opertum purpura imperare coegerunt, instantes cum gladiis et cum omni genere telorum*.

³² For *nobilis servitus*, see T. Adam, *Clementia Principis*, Stuttgart 1970, 120.

³³ See Maximin. 14,2: *instantes cum gladiis et cum omni genere telorum*; cf. Herod. 7,5,6; cf. Trig. tyr. 32,1: *docet Dexippus, nec Herodianus tacet omnesque, qui talia legenda posteris tradiderunt, Titum, tribunum Maurorum, qui a Maximino inter privatos relictus fuerat, timore violentae mortis, ut illi dicunt, invitum vero et a militibus coactum, ut plerique adserunt, imperasse...*; cf. Vespasian's refusal in Josephus' *Bell. Iud.* 4, 601-604 (above n. 21).

³⁴ See Gord. 7,2: *retunsus [rationalis Maximini] deinde a proconsule atque legato nobilibus et consularibus viris ipsis minaretur excidium*; *ibid.* 8,6: *evitandi periculi gratia*; *ibid.* 9,2: *maluit honestas causas habere moriendi quam dedi vinculis et carceri*

chose the purple in preference to the dangers of refusing, and was proclaimed emperor unwillingly.³⁵ However, even this HA version is much more favourable to Gordian than the contemporary Herodian who suspected Gordian of "staging" his refusal in order to avoid the charge of *maiestas*.³⁶

In the HA, Gordian serves as an example of an ideal ruler who fought on behalf of the senate against Maximinus Thrax, an emperor totally denigrated by the HA.³⁷ The HA traces Gordian's ancestry on his father's side to the Gracchi, while his mother was a relative of the Emperor Trajan.³⁸ Gordian was certainly a man of great wealth and long administrative experience³⁹ and was, in spite of his age, endowed with qualities that were likely to commend him to the senate and the Roman people as a suitable liberator of the empire from the tyranny of Maximinus.

M. Claudius Tacitus

The subject of *recusatio* climaxes in the HA in the account of what happened in the senate when M. Claudius Tacitus was elected emperor.⁴⁰ The author skilfully connects Tacitus' refusal with the problem of the army to proclaim a successor for the strong ruler, Aurelianus. The HA, however, embellishes⁴¹ its account of the event which was actually one of political confusion. The army asked the senate to choose an emperor from amongst its own numbers. The senate, however, knowing that the emperors it had chosen were not acceptable to the soldiers, referred the matter back to them. This happened repeatedly and a period of six months elapsed (=the *interregnum* time).⁴² The moderation of the army, its unselfishness, was

Maximini; Maximin. 14,3: *cum vidit neque filio neque familiae suae tutum id esse, volens suscepit imperium, et appellatus est omnibus Afris Augustus cum filio apud oppidum Tysdrum.*

³⁵ See also Maximin. 14,2-3.

³⁶ See Herod. 7,5,7: φιλόδοξος ὢν (C.R. Whittaker [ed. 1970] ad loc.); cf. his account on the refusal of Maximinus, in 6,8,5-6.

³⁷ For Maximinus' "cruelty", see Maximin. 8,5-8; 9,2; 9,8; 10,5; 13,5; 20,1; 22,7; 24,1; 28,1.

³⁸ Gord. 2,2; but see Magie (ed. 1980) ad loc. and Kienast, 188.

³⁹ See Kienast, 188.

⁴⁰ See the acclamations of the senate, Tac. 3-7,1, the total number of chapters in this short life being only nineteen!

⁴¹ See Aurelian. 41,1ff.: *non iniucundum est ipsas inserere litteras, quas ad senatum exercitus misit...*, and Tac. 2,3: *dicenda est tamen causa tam felicium morarum.*

⁴² Aurelian. 40,4.

somewhat of a surprise to the senate (and to the writer)⁴³. In fact, the HA exaggerates the duration of the "republican fashioned" *interregnum*⁴⁴ after Aurelian; it was at the most only two months.⁴⁵

However, according to the HA, the army requested the senate to choose an emperor and finally the senate approached the *primae sententiae senator* Tacitus. In the dialogue between the senators and Tacitus (Tac. 4-7,1), in considering his suitability to rule, the main subject was the candidate's old age. It was forcefully idealized: an aged ruler symbolized a contrast to young successors to the throne who were, and always had been, unable to rule.⁴⁶ The selfishness (*cupido regni*) of the young and the unselfishness of the old emperors were contrasted: an old ruler being good, wise and working *rei publicae causa*. Consequently, the old age of a ruler candidate, or of a usurper, as such, proved his goodness. And in declining the invitation to become emperor, an elderly favourite (of the army or the senate) naturally appealed to his old age (read: to his goodness!).⁴⁷

Probus

In biography, *recusatio* helps in making the contradistinction between "Senatskaiser" and "Soldier emperors". The borderline between these types is not drawn on the basis of where in the first instance a would-be ruler declines imperial powers (before senators or before soldiers), but rather on the basis of his background.

In the case of Probus, this principle leads us to a somewhat paradoxical conclusion: the author (or the authors) who regards the senate as the supreme authority to legitimize the shift of rule praises wholehearted-

⁴³ Tac. 2,2: *quae illa concordia militum? quanta populo quies? quam gravis senatus auctoritas fuit?*

⁴⁴ For the author's speculations on the *interregnum* as a republican fashioned institution, see Tac. 1-2; he likely presents Tacitus' rule as a result of this *interregnum* time, see *ibid.* 3ff.

⁴⁵ So H.M.D. Parker, *A History of the Roman World from A.D. 138 to 337*, London 1969, 212; 352-353; Syme, 237; M. Peachin, *Roman Imperial Titulature and Chronology, A.D. 235-284*, Amsterdam 1990, 44 n. 66. It is also probable that, in reality, some officers supported Tacitus' election, cf. Tac. 7,5-7; Zonaras, 12,28; Syme, 242-243. For the problem, see also L. Polverini, *Da Aureliano a Diocleziano*, ANRW II 2 (1975) 1021-1022 (including his n. 30); Syme, 247: "[Tacitus] a veritable link between Aurelian and Probus; Kienast, 247.

⁴⁶ Tac. 6,4: *Nerones dico et Heliogabalos et Commodos, seu potius semper Incommodos...*; for old age as a Roman ruler's "virtue", see *ibid.* 5,1; see above n. 29-30.

⁴⁷ Like Claudius Pompeianus (Did. 8,3), Gordian (above), Ballista (Trig. tyr. 12,3-4) and Macrianus *senior* (*ibid.* 12,7) [on him, see Kienast, 221].

ly,⁴⁸ and "inadvertently" Probus' refusal before the soldiers who proclaimed him emperor in the summer of 276 A.D.⁴⁹ According to the HA, Probus was a possible liberator of the state from a potential tyrant, Florianus, who was, approximately at the same time,⁵⁰ after Tacitus' death, declared emperor in Asia Minor. Probus' sincere intentions were manifested by citing the correspondence between him and the senate, everything being very favourable to Probus.⁵¹

The death (murder?)⁵² of Tacitus had led to a renewal of civil war,⁵³ because, against Tacitus' promises, his half-brother Florianus (according to the HA) assumed the purple "as a hereditary right" without waiting for a proclamation by his soldiers or a ratification by the senate.⁵⁴ This act does not, however, appear to have occasioned surprise or resentment, and Florianus was recognized emperor throughout the western empire. For the HA, however, Florianus' self-made rule seems to have been an incentive to praise his antagonist, Probus. Probably another motive for the HA *encomium* of Probus was that, during his rule, Probus treated the senate with great respect allowing the senators to retain the rights which already Augustus had granted them.⁵⁵ Therefore the biography presents, with

⁴⁸ Prob. 10,2: *non inepta neque inelegans fabula est, scire, quem ad modum imperium Probus sumpserit.*

⁴⁹ Prob. 10,5-6: *"non vobis expedit, milites, non mecum bene agetis. ego enim vobis blandiri non possum."* *prima eius epistula, data ad Capitonem praef. praet. talis fuit: "imperium numquam optavi et invitus accepi. deponere mihi rem invidiosissimam non licet. agenda est persona, quam mihi miles inposuit...;* the HA does not tell of a coup d'état, not at least initiated by Probus himself, cf. Tac. 14,3: *tantus autem Probus fuit in re militari, ut illum senatus optaret, miles eligeret, ipse p. R. adclamationibus peteret*, Prob. 10,1: *omnis orientalis exercitus eundem imperatorem fecerunt*, and *ibid.* 10,8: *ita ei sine ulla molestia totius orbis imperium et militum et senatus iudicio delatum est.* For Aurelianus' plans to make Probus his successor, see *ibid.* 6,6-7. Aurelius Victor's information about the accession of Probus is parallel, see *Caes.* 37,1-3. See also G. Vitucci, *L'Imperatore Probo*, Roma 1952, 29-30.

⁵⁰ According to Zosimus (1,64,1), Probus was proclaimed emperor by the army of the East some twenty days after Florianus' accession.

⁵¹ See Prob. 11ff. (esp. 11,2-4).

⁵² Kienast, 247.

⁵³ See e.g. Parker, 214 or Ensslin (CAH xii).

⁵⁴ Tac. 14,1: *hic frater Taciti germanus fuit, qui post fratrem arripuit imperium, non senatus auctoritate sed suo motu, quasi hereditarium esset imperium, cum sciret adiuratum esse in senatu Tacitum, ut, cum mori coepisset, non liberos suos sed optimum aliquem principem faceret;* Prob. 10,8; *ibid.* 11,3; cf. *Aur. Victor, Caes.* 36,2: *nullo senatus seu militum consulto;* but see Zosimus, 1,64,1 and Zonaras, 12,29; Vitucci, 26-31; Polverini, 1024 n. 39.

⁵⁵ Prob. 13,1; on his compromising policy, see L. Homo, *Le privilèges administratifs du sénat romain sous l'empire et leur disparition graduelle au cours du IIIe siècle*, RH 138 (1921) 40ff.

laudatory tendencies, a view of the *pacator* Probus, in which he promises to return to a civilian state instead of the (then current) military one?⁵⁶

Censured refusal and false propaganda: Macrinus, Hadrian

Panegyricizing, or alternatively inveighing against, a ruler, the HA lives reiterate the constitutional importance of the Roman senate. Considering the criticism against *recusatio*, the HA responds most malevolently to Opellius Macrinus. His letter containing an appeal to his efforts to decline the soldiers' invitation to accept the rule is indicated as questionable.⁵⁷ Likewise his negligence of the rights of the senate in nominating the emperor is criticized. In a word, the HA discredits the Macrinus ("*quasi invitus*") and blames him for *adfectatio regni* (Opil. 5,4-6):

adcedebat etiam illud, quod militarem motum timebat, ne eo interveniente suum impediretur imperium, quod raptum ierat, sed quasi invitus acceperat: ut sunt homines, qui ad ea se cogi dicunt, quae vel sceleribus comparant. timuit autem etiam collegam, ne et ipse imperare cuperet, sperantibus cunctis, quod si unius numeri concessus accederet, neque ille recusaret, et omnes cupidissime id facerent odio Macrini vel propter vitam probam vel propter ignobilitatem, cum omnes superiores nobiles fuissent imperatores.

Macrinus' apology to the senate is not a unique one in the HA compilation. It namely resembles Hadrian's excuse to the senate for his hurried accession. The life of Hadrian (6,2) relates that the emperor *veniam petit, quod de imperio suo iudicium senatui non dedisset, salutatus scilicet praepropere a militibus imperator, quod esse res publica sine imperatore non posset*. Hadrian's attempts to conciliate the senate, e.g. his rejecting a triumph, are pointed out by an author who did not sympathize with the emperor's policy and who recounts Hadrian's aspirations to make himself

⁵⁶ See Prob. 20; cf. 22,4; *ibid.* 23.; cf. Eutr. 9,17,3. For Probus' *restitutor orbis* propaganda, see Aur. Victor, Caes. 37,3; G. Alföldy, *The Crisis of the Third Century as seen by Contemporaries*, GRBS 15 (1974) 92-93.

⁵⁷ Cf. also Opil. 5,9-6,1: *ad senatum dein litteras misit... interest scire, cuiusmodi oratio fuerit qua se excusavit, ut et inpudentia hominis noscatur et sacrilegium, a quo initium sumpsit improbus imperator*; *ibid.* 6,5: *"detulerunt ad me imperium, cuius ego, p.c., interim tutelam recepi, tenebo regimen, si et vobis placuerit, quod militibus placuit, quibus iam et stipendium dedi et omnia imperatorio more iussi."* Ex analogia, according to these, the author begins to tell of Macrinus' cruelty (*ibid.* 11ff.).

ruler, even by corruption.⁵⁸ His gestures of penitence seem to be a "*recusatio post accessum*" and his appeal refers to his refusal before the legions in Syria, 11th August 117.⁵⁹ J. Béranger's hypothesis about Hadrian's ritual refusal before the legions of Syria is, in my opinion, plausible.⁶⁰ Hadrian's efforts to please the senate would have been more convincing if there would already have been a *recusatio imperii* in front of the legions. Therefore the HA text (esp. *quod esse res publica sine imperatore non posset* – a reminder of his speech to the army?) almost provides evidence for Béranger's assumption.

Conclusion

Both Suetonius' Lives and the HA reflect the great significance of the *recusatio* propaganda for Roman emperors during the principate. As far as possible, they do not fail to report on it. In this respect, these two texts exemplify Roman historiographical trends during the empire. Cassius Dio, for instance, taught the Romans that one who usurps the throne gains the most advantage from refusing to be a candidate for rule. But, on the contrary, one who, without reserve, seeks to obtain the sovereignty will perish.

Dio includes this doctrine in a discussion between Agrippa and Maecenas in 29 B.C., the theme of which was the future of Octavian's position of power.⁶¹ In this dialogue, Agrippa named C. Marius, L. Cornelius Sulla, Metellus Pius and Pompey as examples of statesmen who benefited a great deal from their refusal of the throne or the dictatorship. They either refused or retired afterwards. Such men as L. Cornelius Cinna, Pompeius Strabo, Marius (*iunior*) and Q. Sertorius, and later also Pompey perished because of their lust for power. In some specific cases the policy of "good" rulers, the likes of M. Furius Camillus, Scipio Africanus *maior* and Caesar, was regarded by their opponents as aspiring for a dominating position.

⁵⁸ Hadr. 2,4; 2,9; 3,7; 4,5; 4,10.

⁵⁹ Cf. Hadr. 4,7: *tertium iduum earundem, quando et natalem imperii statuit celebrandum, excessus ei Traiani nuntiatus est.*

⁶⁰ Béranger 1953, 142-143, does not discuss these reports of the HA about Hadrian's propaganda before the senate. He says that "Les sources sont muettes. Mais nous n'avons pas la preuve du contraire." Why reject the HA here when it is accepted, in my opinion, in a more uncertain *recusatio* of Claudius II (Claud. 4,2-3[?]; Béranger, 139)?

⁶¹ Dio 52,13; U. Espinosa Ruiz, Debate Agrippa - Mecenas en Dio Cassio. Respuesta senatorial a la crisis del imperio Romano in época Severiana, Madrid 1982.

Regarding the function of *recusatio* in biographical narrative, a considerable difference lies between Suetonius and the HA. The latter has in its descriptions a stronger tendency towards political rhetoric and towards stressing its *περὶ βασιλείας* doctrine. The pious (when compared to the late empire!) aim of the HA, to remind us repeatedly of the "constitutional" privileges of the senate, induced its author(s) to classify rulers as good or bad, to make contradistinctions between imperial lives. In the HA, this comparative aspect is, in my opinion, more identifiable than in the *De Vita Caesarum*.⁶² Therefore several biographies of the compilation meet, or at least approach, the techniques of panegyric or invective.⁶³ Accordingly, magnifying the "*ars recusandi*" of certain rulers, the HA creates an admixture of biography and panegyrics or, alternatively, of biography and invective: the report of the historical event of consequence – a ruler's accession – is more than satisfied by the author with lofty quotations of the senate and a ruler,⁶⁴ or, in the opposite case, regarded as base propaganda, violently criticized or regarded with nonchalance by the author. In the HA the objective to categorize the ruler is, indeed, to some degree more discernible than in the *De Vita Caesarum*.

The political motives of the authors go beyond the range of this paper. The question arises as to whether the HA unconsciously magnified the person of the ruler at the expense of the authority of the senate when it reconstructed the verbose, and in my opinion very flattering, acclamations

⁶² Some contrasts: between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus, see Alb. 2,1-3,1 as Commodus' opinion; cf. *ibid.* 7,2; 12,1; for the theme, see A. Timonen, *Criticism of Defense; The Blaming of "Crudelitas" in the "Historia Augusta"*, in *Crudelitas: The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*, *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, Sonderband II, Krems 1992, 63ff. (esp. 66-71); between Severus Alexander and Elagabalus, Severus Alexander's person representing the exact opposite of Elagabalus, see Alex. 4,1-3; 18,1-3; 33,3-4; 34; 37; 39,6.9; 40,1; 41,1-3; 42,1-3; 51,1-3); between the Gordians, Pupienus and Balbinus and Maximinus Thrax, see Maximin. 15,2-16,6; Gord. 11; Max. et Balb. 1,4; between Gallienus and some usurpers, see e.g. Trig. tyr. 22,5 [Mussius Aemilianus]; cf. Gall. 1,2; 4,3; 9,1; 10,1; 12,6; for the theme more comprehensively, see esp. W. Hartke, *Geschichte und Politik im spätantiken Rom. Untersuchungen über die Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Klio* 32, Leipzig 1940; between Florianus and Probus, see Prob. 10,1 and 10,8.

⁶³ This similarity between imperial panegyrics and history is noticed by Béranger 1948, 165ff.; for the techniques of panegyric and invective in late antiquity, see A. Cameron, *Claudian, Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, Oxford 1970, 46ff., 254; 255ff.

⁶⁴ The biographies of the HA are burdened with imperial quotations and with orations delivered in the senate; see D. Den Hengst, *Verba, non res, Über die inventio in den Reden und Schriftstücken in der Historia Augusta*, *BHAC* 1984/1985 (1987) 157ff.; cf. H. Szelest, *Eos* 59 (1971) 327ff.; B. Baldwin, *Athenaeum* 59 (1981) 138ff.; J. Béranger, *BHAC* 1984/1985 (1987) 25ff.

of the senate on the accession of a new emperor. Granting that the emperors were "good", esp. Gordian I, Tacitus, the occasions for the senate itself to choose an emperor were exceptional (the years 238 and 275 A.D.). The style of the author, whomsoever the senators elected, was therefore bombastic. Naturally my question reveals only the hindsight of a reader some 1600 years afterwards.

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