

## English Tacitism and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus his Fall*

Chanmi Ko

Ewha Womans University

The petition in the session of the Parliament 1610 demonstrates that King James I's arbitrary rule caused an unprecedented political crisis.

. . . that many of the particulars whereof we [MPs] now complain were in some use in the late Queen's time and not then much impugned. . . . the usage of them being then more moderate gave not so great occasion of offense, and consequently not so much cause to inquire into the right and validity of them. . . . [James's] loving subjects . . . perceive their common and ancient right and liberty to be much declined and infringed in these late years. (qtd. in Hexter 41)

King James unlimitedly exercised his prerogative by controlling over the free debate of Parliament, imposing taxes without consent of Parliament, imprisoning MPs, and dissolving the Parliament on his own authority. The king's attempt to extend his prerogative provoked the Parliament whose members were sensitive to the preservation of their old liberties.<sup>1</sup> In other

words, the egregious abuse of royal power implied the encroachment on liberties of the subjects. Through the comparison between the state of liberty under Elizabeth's rule and James's, the Parliament expressed growing concerns over the present state of absolute monarchy. James's reign as a sign of despotic rule prompted the Jacobeans to stay alert and seek a warning voice about the incipient tyranny. Under this situation, a vogue of Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian, in the Jacobean era served to resist royal misrule. Tacitus's works which delineate ruthless tyrants of the Roman Empire appealed to those who struggled against James's autocratic rule. In other words, the English Taciteans were not just antiquarian but were also involved in the Jacobean real politics. Ben Jonson, one of the English Taciteans, offers his political advice through his play, *Sejanus his Fall* (hereafter *Sejanus*). This paper aims to explore the heightened tension between King James and the English Taciteans through a study of *Sejanus* where Jonson uses Tacitus as a means of critiquing the political reality of Jacobean England and resisting royal misrule.

---

<sup>1</sup> All English law was common law derived from the Ancient Constitution by which liberties and properties of the commonalty were guaranteed (Pocock 340). The Ancient Constitution of England supposedly originated from the Magna Carta which was the first document forced onto a king of England by a group of his subjects and the feudal barons in an attempt to limit a king's prerogatives by law and to protect their privileges. In 1215, this charter was issued to resist King John's arbitrary rule and to proclaim liberties of subjects. According to H. G. Richardson, kings of England swore that they were bound by a law during the coronation oath since the creation of the Magna Carta. In 1275's oath, for example, Edward I promised that he would not do anything without demanding the counsel of prelates and nobles (51). Since accession to the throne is affirmed through a coronation oath which compels a king to put himself under a kind of contract with his subjects—as the bishop of Rochester explained in 1327, unless the king swears to maintain the laws chosen by his people, he will not be crowned—such an oath, in a sense, serves as a legal curb upon the king. The king is not only required to rule over commonalty but also constrained to rule well (65-66). Along with a customary oath, the common law of the Ancient Constitution was believed to secure liberties of the commons.

## James's Misrule and English Tacitism

King James was the focus of political criticism since he disregarded the common law tradition of the Ancient Constitution from which the privileges of king, Parliament, and subjects were derived. The king claimed that the privileges of Parliament were only derived from his grace: "we cannot allow of the sytle, calling it 'your ancient and undoubted right and inheritance,' but could rather have wished that ye had said that your privileges were derived from the grace and permission of our ancestors and us (for most of them grow from precedenst, which shews rather a toleration than inheritance)" (qtd. in Colclough 180). MPs regarded the king's assertion as an outright attack upon their old liberties and attempted to limit the growing power of the Crown. In the midst of resistance towards arbitrary monarchy, the Parliament started to present petitions which demanded the king be prohibited from infringing upon the liberties of subjects. However, James suppressed Parliament's liberty of speech as he warned in his opening speech in 1621 that "you of the Lower House, I would not have you to meddle with complaints against the King, the church or state matters, nor with princes' prerogatives. The Parliament was never called for that purpose. And if among you there be any such busy body, he is a spirit of Satan that means to overthrow the good errand in hand" (qtd. in Colclough 136). The king even imprisoned MPs such as John Hoskyns, Thomas Wentworth, Christopher Neville, and Sir Walter Chute in the Tower for their outspokenness (Colclough 160). James was frequently compared with Tiberius, the Roman tyrant, because his tyrannical rule was aggravated during the tug of war between monarch and Parliament.

Some Parallel'd him to Tiberius for Dissimulation, yet Peace was maintained by him as in the Time of Augustus: And Peace begot Plenty, and Plenty begot Ease and Wantonness, and Ease and Wantonness begot Poetry, and Poetry swelling to that Bulk in his time,

that it begot strange Monstrous Satyrs against the King's own Person.  
(qtd. in Mellor 164)

A Jacobean historian, Arthur Wilson's comment on James indicates that the reality of the Jacobean court was similar to that of the corrupt Roman Empire. James's hypocrisy unquestionably deserved criticism, but his policy of pacifism was also considered a ramification of his ease and wantonness. The presence of a would-be-tyrant urged the Jacobeans to discuss the way to resist and fight this public ill.

Tacitus is renowned for describing the stark reality of tyranny in the Roman Empire. Tacitus's rooted abhorrence towards the tyrannical rule was rediscovered and emphasized by Justus Lipsius, a Flemish philosopher and humanist in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Lipsius restated and revived the idea of constancy—a Stoic ideal which enables people to have an immovable strength of the mind, neither swayed nor depressed by external events—in his *On Constancy* (1584) which influenced late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Lipsian notion of constancy is a driving force to fight against either internal or external wars, rather than endure passively. Lipsius claims that “for by fighting, many a man has gotten the victory, but none by fleeing” (Oestreich 36). He argues that people should endure and fight not only private ills but also public ones. According to Lipsius, those who wish to flee from calamities end up continuing the war because there is no shelter free from public ills such as war, pestilence, famine, tyranny, and slaughter. In this sense, Lipsian constancy is considered the key to solving not only personal problems but also social ones. Lipsius redefines the concept of

---

<sup>2</sup> The frequency of publication of this book attests to a wide and rapid response to the Lipsian notion of constancy throughout Europe. It was printed forty-four times in original Latin and fifteen times in French translation. This book was also translated into Dutch, English, German, Spanish, Italian, and Polish. This book was an international best-seller as the number of its edition exceeded eighty altogether between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Oestreich 13).

constancy as public virtue to confront and fight social evils. As Adriana McCrea points out, Lipsian constancy is a source of "active public life" (4). Constancy as the active participation of citizens in public life had an influence upon the political movement to resist the incipient tyranny in the Jacobean era. Lipsian constancy is linked with the struggle against tyranny because it implies the political view of Tacitus whose portrait of the Roman tyrants in his *Historiae* and *Annals* serves as a warning for royal misrule. Lipsius's *Politicorum sive Civilis Doctrinae Libri Sex* (1589; *Politica* for short) is no other than a compendium of quotations from Tacitus, and a vogue of Lipsius in England entails numerous publications of Tacitus's works. Sir Henry Savile translated Tacitus's *Agricola* and *Historiae* in 1591 and Robert Grenewey dedicated his translation of *Annals* and *Germania* to the Earl of Essex in 1598. Savile's and Grenewey's combined editions were printed six times until the 1640s (Jongsook Lee 110). Under the influence of Lipsius, a cult of Tacitus swept Jacobean England.

Lipsius uses Tacitus for advice on princely rule, which is a political voice resistant to misgovernment. In his treatise on politics, *Politica*, Lipsius draws on Tacitus's quotations. Although he claims that one ruler's prudence and virtue is a more effective restraint on the abuse of power than any other (Salmon 204), Lipsius emphasizes that the right of the prince stands on his duty to secure peace and order. In other words, he suggests a limited monarchy. He is opposed to tyranny of which consequences are public ills such as violence, lawlessness, and injustice (Oestreich 55). Lipsius's anti-tyranny is influenced by Tacitus who writes that under the yoke of tyranny the oppressed "felt the uttermost extremity inservitude" seeing "[t]he very society of speaking and hearing being taken from us by straight inquisition" (qtd. in Lipsius 127). This Roman historian not only narrates what happened in the past but also presents a viewpoint on the past events through his *Annals*.

I have to present in succession the merciless biddings of a tyrant, incessant prosecutions, faithless friendships, the ruin of innocence, the same causes issuing in the same results, and I am everywhere confronted by a wearisome monotony in my subject matter. Then, again, an ancient historian has but few disparagers, and no one cares whether you praise more heartily the armies of Carthage or Rome. But of many who endured punishment or disgrace under Tiberius, the descendants yet survive; or even though the families themselves may be now extinct, you will find those who, from a resemblance of character, imagine that the evil deeds of others are a reproach to themselves. Again, even honour and virtue make enemies, condemning, as they do, their opposites by too close a contrast. But I return to my work. (163)

Tacitus's historiography intends to call readers' attention to the present circumstances. His ultimate goal is to criticize the current issues by showing similarities between the past and the present. Accordingly, Tacitus is considered once a historian and a political critic to speak out against the tyranny of the Imperial Rome. In this vein, Lipsius judges that reference to Tacitus is pertinent to his political critique.

The dedication Lipsius offered the German emperor, Maximilian II, with the 1581 edition of *C. Cornelii Taciti Opera Omnia quae extant*, exemplifies his use of Tacitus to politicize his arguments:

Let everyone in him [Tacitus] consider the courts of princes, their private lives, counsels, commands, actions, and from the apparent similitude that is betwixt those times and ours let them expect the like events. You shall find under tyranny flatters and informers, evils too well known in our times, nothing simple and sincere, and no true fidelity even amongst friends; frequent accusations of treason the only fault of those who had no fault; the destruction of great men in heaps, and a peace more cruel than any war. I confess the greatest part of his history is full of unpleasant and sorrowful accidents, but then let us suppose what was spoken by the dying Thasea spoken to every one of

us: "Young man, consider well, and though I implore the Gods to avert the omen, yet you are born in those times that require the well fixing your mind by examples of constancy." (qtd. in Salmon 200-01)

Lipsius suggests that the prince should learn from parallels between the past and the present because the public ills are not unprecedented but recurring and familiar. For Lipsius, the best counsel to the prince is history itself. He casts himself in the role of a counselor to guide a sovereign into the right path in the state-government by drawing on Tacitism. That is, Lipsius professes that his constancy is a warning voice to royal misrule or to potential tyranny as he is aligned with Tacitus in political terms. The use of Tacitus for a vigorous protest against royal misrule is not found in Lipsius alone. Many political thinkers espouse Tacitism, considering Tacitus's anti-tyranny as a basis of resistance theories of absolutism. Niccolo Machiavelli frequently uses Tacitus's maxims on monarchy to bolster his own republican arguments in *Discourses on Livy* (218-35; Mellor 156). In addition, Francesco Guicciardini finds Tacitus useful to his own writing for the purpose of repelling the despotic forces of Habsburg in Italy in 1527 (Salmon 201). In France, also, the Huguenot François Hotman consults Tacitus's *Germania* to corroborate his own argument that royal power require popular assent (Mellor 163). In this fashion, the Roman historian becomes a rallying point for anti-absolutists throughout Europe.

Tacitean politics was introduced into England by Sir Philip Sidney and his circle. It is alleged that in 1577 Sidney visited Louvain where Lipsius lectured on Tacitus and since then they started to correspond with each other. Also, Sidney wrote to his younger brother, Robert Sidney, a letter recommending Tacitus as superior and inestimable in the study of politics. At the urging of Philip, Robert read Lipsius's 1585 edition of Tacitus and filled its margin with his own annotations on the parallels between Tacitus's Rome and England of his day (McCrea 32). In particular, the

Sidneys were drawn to Tacitus because of the semblance between Agricola (Tacitus's father-in-law whose public career as a governor is depicted in *Agricola*) and Henry Sidney (father of Philip and Robert who served as Queen Elizabeth's Lord Deputy in Ireland) that both Agricola's loyal services abroad and Henry's were rewarded with their sovereigns' unjust suspicions over their loyalty (Brennan 49-50). Attracted by Lipsius's teachings, Philip attempted to invite Lipsius to England in 1586 (Lee, "Neostoic Ideas" 9). There survives little evidence to show whether Sidney and Lipsius actually met. However, the fact that Lipsius dedicated to Sidney a work on Latin pronunciation is conclusive evidence to indicate their close connection (McCrea 32; Salmon 205; Mellor 158). Sidney's circle also showed interest in Tacitism. John Stradling, a translator of Lipsius's *On Constancy*, dedicated his English version of 1594 to Sidney's uncle, Earl of Leicester whose ward married Robert Sidney (Jin-ah Lee 9; Salmon 206). Moreover, Sidney's closest friend Fulke Greville tried to introduce Tacitean history through Dr. Issac Dorislaus (Norbrook 48). It is the Sidney circle that adapted Tacitean politics to English politics. Sidney's active involvement in political society is triggered by his will to fight against the sovereign's unruly desire. His challenge to Queen Elizabeth—counseling her not to marry a Frenchman, the Duke of Anjou—shows that Sidney plays the role of a guard against the arbitrary monarchy. As an anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish Protestant, he opposed the Queen who considered marriage to a royal Catholic in his letter:<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Sidney himself was a witness to a horrible scene of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre while in Paris in 1572. The atrocious religious persecution of French Huguenots came as a huge shock for the English Protestant. He was strongly opposed to the match between the Queen and the Duke of Anjou on the grounds that Catherine de Médicis, the Duke of Anjou's mother, was thought to have arranged the massacre. Wary of the influence of Catholicism, Sidney spoke out against sovereign in an unreserved way (Qulligan 83).



Most feared & beloved, most swete and gracious Sovereaine . . . carrying no other olive branches of intercession, but the lying myself at your feet, nor no other insinuacio . . . but the true vowed sacrifice of unfeigned love, I will in simple & direct terms (as hoping they shall only come to your mercifull eyes) sett down . . . my minde in this most important matter. . Common people will know that [Anjou] is the sonne of that Jezabel of our age: that his brothers made oblacion of their owne sisters marriage, the easier to make massacres of all sexes. (*Works* 3: 51)

Sidney had to pay the price for his daring act of standing against the royal marriage negotiation by falling out of favor with the Queen. However, Sidney started to stand out as an emblem of resistance to the absolute monarchy. Under the influence of Sidney, a power struggle started between the monarch and the English Taciteans such as the Earl of Essex, Henry Wotton, Henry Cuffe, Robert Sidney, Greville, Savile, John Hayward, and Francis Bacon (Mellor 158).

The burgeoning cult of Tacitus swept throughout Jacobean society. Tacitism was more favorably received by the Jacobeans because it appealed to those who were discontent with James's foreign policy. James did not adopt the aggressive anti-Spanish policy despite the English antipathy towards Spain, a staunch defender of Catholicism in the Continent. In the midst of the growing concerns about extension of Spanish power, Tacitus's description of the oppression of the Roman Empire reminded the English of a potential threat of Spain. Among scholars drawn to Tacitus, Savile was most devoted to translating Tacitus's *Historiae*<sup>4</sup> and *Agricola*<sup>5</sup> which have a

---

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus's *Historiae* deals with Roman deterioration into civil wars and the regime of four emperors starting with Nero and ending with the despotism of Vespasian. This book sketches numerous mutinies and provincial rebellions.

<sup>5</sup> *Agricola* is a biography of Tacitus's father-in-law Gnaeus Julius Agricola, an eminent Roman general whose impregnable virtue marks him out amid moral collapse of Rome. This book offers geography and ethnography of the ancient Britain since there is an account of Agricola's career as a governor of Britain.

bearing on the Roman imperialism. As Paulina Kewes points out, Savile's keen interest in the two works results from his anti-Spanish sentiment. Savile intentionally modernizes the titles and place names in the original Roman works in order to draw an analogy between the Roman past and contemporary European conditions: he shows parallels between European wars—the Dutch revolt against Spain and the Huguenot struggle against the Spanish-backed Holy League of France—and violence of the Roman Empire against colonists like the Gauls, the Batavians, the Jews, and the Britons (534). Savile depicts in detail the Roman Imperial despotism. The Romans violated the terms of the original league by divesting the native population of their old liberties and privileges, imposing extortionate taxes, or carrying out forcible drafts. Savile's retouch reminded the contemporary readers of the Continental upheavals implemented by Philip II of Spain (535). The Batavian revolt is associated with the Dutch struggle against Spain since the Dutch claimed the Batavians as their ancestors.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the portrayal of Britain's colonial past under the Roman Empire is reminiscent of Spain's attempted invasion of England. The Jacobean were highly cautious about Spanish expansion, observing the Continental perturbation and unrest caused by Philip II's ambition for universal dominion. They assumed that England would be the next target of Spanish attack. In this fashion, the use of Tacitus served as an alarm over the danger of upcoming Spain Imperialism. Moreover, it evoked a sense of dissatisfaction with James's pro-Spanish policy. James promised a

---

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus is, to some extent, critical toward the Batavian rising against Rome in his original narration. He denounces its leader, Julius Civilis, as a self-interested and self-aggrandizing dissimulator, judging that Civilis's speech to encourage his countrymen to battle bravely is specious and insincere. Tacitus is undoubtedly a proponent of Rome's Imperial expansion because he regards colonists and native tribes as barbarians whose subjection is a natural consequence of their inferiority (Kewes 532). In fact, for Tacitus, colonists are none other than the Other. In his history books, he focuses on royal misrule rather than colonial oppression.

time of universal peace by styling himself as a peacemaker. However, his foreign policy with focus on peacemaking was proven to be just non-involvement in international affairs. James's decision not to involve England in the Thirty Years' War disappointed those who believed that true peace could be secured and maintained through the international alliance and struggle against Spanish Imperialist forces.<sup>7</sup> Besides, in the latter end of the reign of James, the match between Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta fell under consideration. Anti-Spanish Imperialism propaganda of England together with anxiety over James's foreign policy underlies tremendous popularity of Tacitus.

Tacitism in England became more aggressive and subversive, indebted to a Dutch classicist, Isaac Dorislaus. He was the nominee of Greville for the first chair of history at Cambridge. In 1627, Dorislaus selected Tacitus as his topic in a series of two lectures at Cambridge where he asserted that the Roman emperors initially had no legitimate authority and that the supreme dominion remained in the hands of the Roman people (Mellor 191; Norbrook 48). His idea is politically radical, contradicting theories of the divine rights of a king. Indeed, he used a kind of contractual ideas to show that subjects could sometimes resist their king if royal misrule happened (Sommerville 73). In other words, his Tacitean teachings in England – applying studies of history to contemporary politics – served as a stronger weapon to fight tyranny.<sup>8</sup> Dorislaus's dangerous politicization of

---

<sup>7</sup> Frederick V, Elector Palatine, and his wife Elizabeth (James's daughter), who were crowned as king and queen of Bohemia after a Protestant uprising against the Catholic rule of Ferdinand of Styria, were overrun by Ferdinand's supporters in 1620. James refused to provide Frederick V and Elizabeth in a predicament with military aid.

<sup>8</sup> Dorislaus as a foreigner was unaware of the ramifications his discussion on sovereignty could bring out in the realm of Jacobean real politics. In fact, he intended to justify the Dutch revolt against Spain through a study of the Roman history (Sommerville 73). However, English audiences interpreted that his argument could be applied to the political conditions of England. At one level, he

academic world raised issues among the Jacobean courtiers and scholars. The use of Tacitus was more and more controversial in the context of English politics.

James was unquestionably dissatisfied with the dissemination of Tacitean teachings. Anti-Tacitean reaction arose, centering the king and royalists. For James, Tacitism along with the Lipsian notion of constancy should be repulsed. He launched a diatribe against Lipsius who played a key role of reviving Tacitean politics, on the charge of his feigning virtue and instigating people to live under false pretences. In the 1603 edition of *Basilikon Doron*, James denounced not only the Dutch philosopher but also his followers:

Keep trew Constancie, not onely in your [Prince Henry's] kindenesse towards honest men; but being also *inuicti animi* [invincible spirit] agasint all aduersities: not with that Stoicke insensible stuppiditie, wherewith many in our dayes, preassing to winne honour in imitating that ancient sect, by their inconstant behaior in their own liues, belie their profession. (41-42)

The king evidently felt misgivings about the growth of Tacitism, regarding the English Taciteans as political dissidents. Also, Issac Casaubon labeled Tacitus as a source of all evil actions in his edition of Polybius (McCrea 56). Devoted to comparing the history of Polybius and that of Tacitus, Casaubon reproached the Taciteans:

We can easily excuse Tacitus, but not those who prefer this Author before all the other Historians, and aver that he is to be frequently read by Statesmen, and the only way from whom Princes, and their Counsellors should take rules for the government of Common-wealths.

---

unwittingly stumbled into the battlefield of politics under the Stuarts (Mellor 181-82). Hated by royalists, Dorislaus was finally assassinated at the Hague.

Now if we would expose the absurdity of this Opinion, it would not be difficult to prove, that those who think so, accuse our present Princes of Tyranny, or would manifestly teach them the Principles of Tyranny; for what can be more pernicious (especially to a young Man) than the reading of those *Annals*? (qtd. in Mellor 171)

Representing the royal criticism of Tacitism, Casaubon views the Taciteans' check on tyranny as undue obtrusion, which could arouse the king's greater rage. Likewise, Edmund Bolton was antipathetic to the Taciteans, considering them potential insurgents. In his *Nero Caesar or Monarchy Depraved*, Bolton admires the administration of the empire during Nero's early reign and claims that any plots against sovereign deserve chastisement because they contradict divine injunctions against rebellion. Bolton corroborates James's belief in the divine right of kings by illustrating in his work that the regime of the worst ruler is much better than the anarchy of revolt (Salmon 224). Bolton's idea is no other than the epitome of pro-absolutism of James when he states that "[n]o prince is so bad as not to make monarckie seeme the best forme of government" (qtd. in McCrea 56). Under the process of justification of boundless royal prerogative, the monarch tightened guard against those who used Tacitus in order to criticize the reality of Jacobean court. The result of penning Tacitus was a summons into the Privy Council (McCrea 56). In political terms, to advocate Tacitean history was such a daring attack on the absolute monarchy that the Taciteans in the Jacobean era were in danger and forced to be silent.

### **Ben Jonson's Political Advice in *Sejanus***

Politicization of Tacitean teachings was prominent not in the actual court alone but in literary contexts. Ben Jonson professes himself to be one

of the English Taciteans as shown in his epigram to Savile.<sup>9</sup>

I should believe the soul of Tacitus

In thee, most weighty Savile, lived to us:

.....

We need a man can speak of the intents,

The counsels, actions, orders and events

Of state, and censure them; we need his pen

Can write the things, the causes, and the men.

But most we need his faith (and all have you)

That dares nor write things false, nor hide things true.

(“Epigram 95” 3-4, 31-36)

Affirming “the soul of Tacitus,” Jonson emphasizes the gravity of a Tacitean historian able to “speak of” and “censure” all about state affairs without reserve. He concludes that a historian needs to give a true picture of the present state of a nation in the face of threat by the state authorities. Jonson joins the Taciteans who “dares nor write things false, nor hide things true” by extolling Savile as a reincarnation of Tacitus in his time.

*Sejanus* is an epitome of Jonson’s Tacitism.<sup>10</sup> Jonson dramatizes Roman

---

<sup>9</sup> Jonson, who is the so-called “Roman poet” in England for his life-long attempt to revive Classicism, was inspired by Lipsius in that the Dutch humanist was devoted to adapting the literature, historiography, and Stoic morality of the early Roman Empire to the needs of contemporary European society (McCrea 138). In addition, his close connections with the Sidney circle marked himself as an adherent of Tacitism. Dependent upon the patronage of aristocrats, Jonson enjoyed the patronage of the Sidneys such as Elizabeth Sidney (daughter of Sir Philip Sidney) and Mary Wroth (daughter of Robert Sidney). The close tie with the Sidney family through this patronage rendered him an impetus for his well-known country house poem, *To Penshurst*, as well as for eulogizing the Sidneys in his *Epigrams*. He was not just a beneficiary of the Sidney family but remained their intimate friend through intellectual interchanges.

<sup>10</sup> This play was firstly performed at court in 1603. Jonson published a revised edition of the play, accompanied by copious marginal notes citing its historical sources, in the 1605 quarto and in the 1616 folio.

history in which evils dominate the state. Depicted as “a play of whispers, of informers, toadies, flatters and spies, who congregate in small impenetrable groups” (Barton 92), the suffocating atmosphere of *Sejanus* brings to mind the sinister and corrupt court of the Jacobean era. The play intends to awaken contemporaries to recurring political types such as tyrants, informers, flatters, favorites, conspirators, and traitors in history as Lipsius emphasizes the significance of history as a mirror of the present in his *Politica*: “to auoyd, that which is dishonest either to be begunne or ended. In which regard, it is most necessarie in this part of Ciuill life, neither did Polybius without good cause affirme, *histories to be the truest doctrine, to practice vs in the managing of Ciuill affaires*. And most necessarie they are in matter of *publicke counsel*, the memorie of things past being most profitable, in common consultations” (qtd. in Cain 173; emphasis mine). Modeling after Lipsius and Tacitus,<sup>11</sup> Jonson represents the Roman Empire of Tiberius on stage in order to call into question the reality of his time.

Jonson presents James I under the guise of Tiberius, showing their similarity in using politics of ambiguity. That is, he embodies the analogy between James's “Dissimulation” and Tiberius's which is drawn by Arthur Wilson. Tiberius in *Sejanus* is well-versed in the art of dissimulation since he ambiguously reacts to the courtly flatterers:

We must make vp our eares, 'gainst these assaults  
Of charming tongues; we pray you vse, no more

---

<sup>11</sup> *Sejanus* illustrates Jonson's obsession with antiquity, especially Lipsius's teachings. On one level, *Sejanus* is no other than a jumble of quotations from Lipsius. As Daniel Boughner points out, the play is “a word-for-word copy of Lipsius” since the marginal annotations of the Quarto are lifted directly from Lipsius's edition of Tacitus's *Annals* (249). Lipsius's edition really is a quarry of a number of scenes and speeches in *Sejanus* including the plot against Silius, the exchange of letters on the desire of Sejanus to marry Livia, the Senate rife with sycophants, and the comparison drawn by Cordus in his self-defense between the freedom permitted under Augustus and forbidden by Tiberius (252-54).

These contumelies to vs: stile not vs  
 Or lord, or mighty, who professe our selfe  
 The seruant of the Senate, and are proud  
 T'enyoy them our good, iust, and fauouring lords. (370)

Tiberius pretends to be a virtuous ruler, professing himself to be a willing servant of the Senate and a detester of sycophants. It seems that he never abuses his authority and that he pays full respect to his vassals and the Senate. However, the ruler who apparently advocates a limited monarchy dissembles his great ambition to stand above the Senate. In fact, it is more difficult for senators to vie with such a subtle and tactful tyrant than with an undisguised one. Silius, one of the few honest senators, deploues hypocrisy of the Emperor.

But, when his grace is merely but lip-good,  
 And that no longer, then he aires himself  
 Abroad in publique, there, to seeme to shun  
 The strokes, and stripes of flatterers, which within  
 Are lechery vuto him, and so feed  
 His bruitish sense with their afflicting sound,  
 As (dead to vertue) he permits himself  
 Be carried like a pitcher, by the eares,  
 To euery act of vice: this is a case  
 Deserues our feare, and doth presage the nigh  
 And close approach of blood and tyranny. (370)

Tiberius tyrannically governs his people with the art of ambiguity as Silius sees through the duplicity of the Emperor. His feigning to be a parliamentarist and a prince of limited power can keep subjects from resisting his authority.

In a similar fashion, James of England was clever at the use of ambiguity. The way Tiberius styles himself as an inculpable ruler calls to



mind James's dissimulation, as demonstrated in his opening speech to Parliament in 1621 (three years after the formal dissolution of his first Parliament):

a king [as opposed to a tyrant] knows his subjects can never have so good access unto him, speak so freely and safely, and have means to lay open the just compliants and griefs of his subjects as in parliament; and this parliament, I hope, shall be called *the parliament of love*. (qtd. in Colclough 160; emphasis mine)

Anthony Weldon, a Jacobean historian, gets to the core of James's politics of doubleness as he claims that "the king's familiar motto, *Beati pacifici*, Blessed are the peacemakers, was joined to another, *Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare*, He who does not know how to dissimulate, does not know how to rule" (qtd. in Kim 190). James was known as a peace-loving ruler, but he tried to merely calm down disputes and disturbances. In other words, he was committed to showing that nothing was wrong with state affairs. The king was careful of veiling his inwardness, as written in the *Basilikon Doron*:

It is a trew old saying, That a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold: and therefore although a King be neuer so precise in the dischargeing of his office, the people who seeth but the outward parte, will euer judge of the substance by the circumstances, & according to the out warde appearance (if his behavior be light or dissolute) will conceiue preoccupied conceits of the Kings inwarde intention, which although with time (the tryer of al trueth) it wil vanish, by the euidence of the contrarie euent, yet *interim patitur iustus*: and prejudged conceites will (in the mean time) breed Contempt, the Mother of Rebellion and disorder. (43)

James believed that he would lose his supreme power as soon as his secrets were discovered by his subjects. He did not allow his people to read and comprehend his “inwarde intention” just like Jonson’s Tiberius, a master of politics of ambiguity. Jonson provides a type of foxy tyrant in his Roman play, in allusion to James. The author supposedly directs his readers to apply the lessons of his Roman history to their contemporary political situations through the parallel between the Roman tyrant and the king of England.

Jonson also brings to the fore the issues of freedom of speech in his Tacitean play. Tiberius’s hunger for flattery and lust for despotism necessarily marginalizes the senators’ frankness of speech. Jonson emphasizes the importance of freedom of speech in *Timber, or Discoveries*: “Hee [King] needs no Emissaries, Spies, Intelligencers, to intrap true Subjects. Hee fears no Libels, no Treasons. His people speake, what they thinke, and talke openly, what they doe in secret. They have nothing in their breasts, that they need a Cipher for” (qtd. in Cain 177). Contrary to his political ideal, Tiberian Rome in the play is rife with spies and informers who thwart free discussion in the court.

We, that (within these fourscore yeeres) were borne  
 Free, equall lords of the triumphed world,  
 And knew no masters, but affections,  
 To which betraying first our liberties,  
 We since became the slaues to one mans lusts;  
 And now to many: euery ministring spie  
 That will accuse, and sweare, is lord of you,  
 Of me, of all, our fortunes, and our liues.  
 Our looks are call’d to question, and our words,  
 How innocent soeuer, are made crimes;  
 We shall not shortly dare to tell our dreames,  
 Or thinke, but ‘twill be treason. (362-63)

Silius complains about the stifling atmosphere of the court where no one speaks openly and frankly about the princely rule. This senator points out that prohibition of free discussion leads to encroachment upon old liberties of subjects. In other words, honest and loyal counselors are absent due to the deprivation of freedom of speech, and consequently there is no way to prevent the ruler from exercising unlimited power. In short, suppression on freedom of speech enables Tiberius to rule tyrannically. Jonson puts into Silius's mouth his own view on the regime of James. As has already been noted, James tried to prohibit freedom of speech, considering political counsel offensive. He even issued a proclamation against "excesse of Lavish and Licentious Speech of matters of State" in 1620 (Roberts, Introduction xlix). Jonson projects James's attack upon freedom of speech onto his Roman play where none is allowed to speak freely and safely.

The Roman court silenced by the tyrant contradicts the spirit of Tacitism in Jonson's panegyric upon Savile. There is no historian who "dares not write things false, nor hide things true" in Tiberian Rome. Lipsius as an admirer of Tacitus recognizes the need for the environment where "they [historians] may with a stout courage, & without feare, vtter their opinion; & not frame their speech, rather with the fortune of the Prince, then with the Prince him selfe" (qtd. in Cain 176). Echoing this Tacitean history, Jonson shows the tragedy of a Roman historian in his work. Cremutius Cordus, who writes annals of Pompey and Julius Caesar as a historian, is accused of sedition by Satrius, one of Tiberius's villainous retainers.

I doe accuse thee here, Cremvtivs Cordvs  
 To be a man factious, and dangerous,  
 A sower of sedition in the state,  
 A turbulent, and discontented spirit,  
 Which I will proue from thine owne writings, here,  
 The Annal's thou hast publish'd; where thou bit'st

The present age, and with a vipers tooth,  
 Being a member of it, dar'st that ill  
 Which neuer yet degenerous bastard did  
 Vpon his parent. (394)

Cordus's annals where "the present age" is veiled pose a threat to the tyrannical regime of Tiberius, and hence his books are all burnt and reduced to ashes. Through victimization of the Roman historian who attempts to adopt the Tacitean method in writing the past events, Jonson suggests that there is no hope in a regime intolerant of historians' political voice which would be vital to a healthy state. The author casts Arruntius, an old senator of Tiberian Rome, in the role of a Tacitean in order to lay emphasis on history as the best advice on the current issues. Arruntius disproves another senator, Sabinus's point that history is not useful to investigate the current problems since the times of the annals are not the same as his times.

Times? The men,

The men are not the same: 'tis we are base,  
 Poore, and degenerate from th'exalted streine  
 Of our great fathers. Where is now the soule  
 Of god-like Cato? he, that durst be good,  
 When Caesar durst be euill; and had power,  
 As not to liue his slaue, to dye his master.  
 Or where the constant Brvtvs, that (being prooffe  
 Against all charme of benefits) did strike  
 So braue a blow into the monsters heart  
 That sought vnkindly to captiue his contrie?  
 O, they are fled the light. Those mightie spirits  
 Lye rak'd yp, with their ashes in their vrnes,  
 And not a sparke of their eternall fire  
 Glowes in a present bosome. All's but blaze,  
 Flashes, and smoke, wherewith we labour so,

There's nothing *Romane* in vs; nothing good,  
 Gallant, or great: 'Tis true, that Cordvs say's,  
*Braue Cassivs was the last of all that race.* (362)

Arruntius argues that Cordus's history enables contemporaries to face the reality of the corrupt and degenerate regime through the implicit comparison with the late Republic of Rome. In this sense, a Tacitean historian serves as a good counselor who can tell truth of the present state. However, Jonson illustrates that there is no place for such a good counselor in Tiberian Rome. Jonson as a proponent of Tacitism discloses in his work the tragic flaws of the tyrannical government where political critique is not acceptable and historians are silenced. Through the portrait of Tiberius whose semblance can be found in James, Jonson reveals his anxiety about the incipient tyranny in his time, and politicizes his voice by espousing Tacitism.

Jonson's honest advice and political warning through his *Sejanus* undoubtedly offended James. For James, *Sejanus* was an intolerable political satire. Jonson was called before the Privy Council and interrogated in return for his political advice.<sup>12</sup> But he was eventually released as he strongly denied any reference to English affairs.<sup>13</sup> In other words, he could

---

<sup>12</sup> Another Jacobean playwright, Samuel Daniel, was also summoned to the Privy Council because his work, *Philotas*, was considered to espouse Tacitism and criticize the Jacobean court.

<sup>13</sup> Jonson was against subversive ideas that the better form of the government is a republic, although he obviously assumed the Tacitean attitude to hold the tyrannical regime in check. What matters to him in terms of politics is not the form of government but personalities of state officers. His other Roman play, *Catiline*, corroborates his view that political systems are critically affected by characters of rulers. What he delineates in *Catiline*, set in Republican Rome, is social unrest and anarchy caused by conspirators to subvert the state. For him, the form of a republic holds no promise for the best government (McCrea 167). Moreover, Jonson himself added a postscript naming his piece "a mark of terror

escape punishment only by stressing that his work is just an outcome of his antiquarian pursuit. At one level, *Sejanus* is no other than a display of his erudition in the Classics because the margins of the text are closely packed with references to Lipsius, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Seneca, and Juvenal taken from the Latin editions (Salmon 219). Jonson could survive the crisis under the pretext of his love of Classics. Not only in the place of Parliament but also in the literary world was freedom of speech restrained. Allusion to Tacitus in particular was forbidden in Jacobean England. Just as Cordus in Tiberian Rome was inhibited from writing history which mirrors the current social problems, Jonson himself was restricted to writing a political text under James's reign. The fact that his poetics of Tacitism was proven to be risky demonstrates that history repeats itself and similarities between the past and the present are efficiently used to examine the present state as Tacitus argues. While statesmen in the place of Parliament presented numerous petitions to the king, Jonson deployed his political advice based on Tacitean teachings within his *Sejanus*. In this regard, *Sejanus* is one English Tacitean's political voice about the princely rule. Using Tacitism as a dangerous ploy in his work, Jonson tried to be a model of the active participation in public life. In this fashion, Tacitism was discussed not only in the political realm but also in the literary context, marked as a rallying cry against royal misrule or incipient tyranny in the Jacobean period.

---

to all traitors and treason" when he revised *Sejanus* to republish immediately after the Gunpowder Plot (qtd. in Salmon 219). It is plausible that his involvement with the prosecution of the Gunpowder Plot made Jonson more vulnerable to and defensive against state authorities. As a matter of fact, Jonson's attitude towards Tacitus changed over time and according to circumstances.

## Works Cited

- Barton, Anne. *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Boughner, Daniel. "Jonson's Use of Lipsius in *Sejanus*." *Modern Language Notes* 73.4 (1958): 247-55.
- Brennan, Michael G. *The Sidneys of Penshurst and the Monarchy, 1500-1700*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2006.
- Cain, Tom. "Jonson's Humanist Tragedies." *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*. Ed. A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 162-89.
- Colclough, David. *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Hexter, J. H. "Power Struggle, Parliament, and Liberty in Early Stuart England." *The Journal of Modern History* 50.1 (1978): 1-50.
- James I, King of England. *The Political Works of James I*. Ed. Charles Howard McIlwain. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2006.
- Jonson, Ben. "Epigram 95 (To Sir Henry Savile)." *The Collected Poems*. London: Penguin, 1988. 66.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sejanus his Fall*. 1616. 1994. *English Verse Drama Full-Text Database*. Web. 3 Sep. 2012.
- Kewes, Paulina. "Henry Savile's Tacitus and the Politics of Roman History in Late Elizabethan England." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 74.4 (2011): 515-51.
- Kim, Youngtae. "Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*: The Politics of Ambiguity and the Art of Writing." *Shakespeare Review* 24 (1994): 185-213.
- Lee, Jin-Ah. "Neostoic Ideas in Justus Lipsius's *On Constancy*." *Journal of Classic and English Renaissance Literature* 19.2 (2010): 5-25.
- Lee, Jongsook. "Tacitus, 'Tacitus,' and Tacitism in Renaissance England." *The Journal of Greco-Roman Studies* 9.1 (1995): 101-32.
- Lipsius, Justus. *On Constancy*. Ed. John Sellars. Trans. Sir John Stradling. Bristol: Phoenix P, 2006.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Harvey C. Masfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- McCrea, Adriana. *Constant Minds: Political Virtue and the Lipsian Paradigm in England, 1584-1650*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Mellor, Ronald. "Tacitus, Academic Politics, and Regicide in the Reign of Charles I: The Tragedy of Dr. Isaac Dorislaus." *International Journal of the*

- Classical Tradition* 11.2 (2004): 153-93.
- Norbrook, David. *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Oestreich, Gerhard. *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Pocock, J. G. A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975.
- Quilligan, Maureen. *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005.
- Richardson, H. G. "The English Coronation Oath." *Speculum* 24.1 (1949): 44-75.
- Roberts, Josephine A. Introduction. *The First Part of The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*. By Mary Wroth. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1995.
- Salmon, J. H. M. "Stoicism and Roman Example: Seneca and Tacitus in Jacobean England." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50.2 (1989): 199-225.
- Sidney, Philip. *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*. Ed. Albert Feuillerat. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969.
- Sommerville, J. P. *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603-1640*. London: Longman, 1986.
- Tacitus, Cornelius. *The Annals. The Complete Works of Tacitus*. Ed. Moses Hadas. Trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. New York: Modern Lib., 1942. 3-416.



**ABSTRACT****English Tacitism and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus his Fall*****Chanmi Ko**

This paper inquires into the relation between the reality of Jacobean politics and the rise of English Tacitism. King James I's unruly desire to extend his prerogatives brought about the encroachment upon old liberties of the commons and freedom of speech. The Jacobeans were prompted to seek a voice warning of the dangers of royal misrule, when they recognized the potential perils of James's prerogatives. Tacitism served as a rallying cry against the incipient tyranny, as Tacitus's historiography was based on antipathy towards tyrannical rule, and as its method was to critique the present state through parallels between the past and the present. James's reign was characterized as a tug of war between the King and the adherents of Tacitism, as the tension between the two heightened. This paper investigates this power struggle between the monarch and the English Taciteans through a study of *Sejanus*, where Ben Jonson uses Tacitus as a means of political criticism. Jonson adopts the Tacitean method in his work by uncovering a true picture of his times through depictions of similarities between Tiberian Rome and James's England. Not only in the place of Jacobean court but also in the literary world did English Taciteans strive to offer political advice.

**Key Words** | Tacitism, Tacitus, Lipsius, James I, Jacobean England, Ben Jonson, *Sejanus his Fall*