

IMPERSONAL EXPRESSIONS AND UNIDENTIFIED
SPOKESMEN IN GREEK AND ROMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY
AND BIOGRAPHY*

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The famed journalist Walter Lippman once said, 'There is a basic conflict between news, which signals an event, and the seeking of truth, which is a much more complex and time-consuming process'. This statement is concerned firstly with that which is *news* and therefore worth reporting, albeit superficially, and secondly with the *truth* which lies behind outward appearances. When studying a report or information of some kind the critical reader is continually endeavouring to distinguish between that which is mere news, often sensational, of a dubious nature and even false on the one hand, and that which is true on the other. Fortunately the reader is often aided in this effort by certain tell-tale words used by the journalist or writer. Excerpts from newspapers and periodicals will illustrate this phenomenon: Regarding ex-president Nixon's visit to France and England a year ago a correspondent wrote: '*Cynics have been saying* the droop-nosed lawyer is merely trying to whip up publicity for his memoirs, and to some extent he has succeeded in reviving interest in himself'.¹ Concerning the second great scandal involving Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands the same periodical reported: '*There has also been comment* by a mysterious female background figure who *reportedly* has the letters that passed to and from Berlin but will not release them for fear they would start disturbances in Holland'.² As to the 'Dump Carter Campaign' the following report is typical: 'Four years ago *most Americans* had never heard of Jimmy Carter. Now *most* of them *apparently wish* he had remained in comparative obscurity'.³ As to the ambitions of President Carter's wife a correspondent writes: '*There are even whispers* that Rosalynn secretly fancies becoming the first woman president one day',⁴ and also 'though *most voters* do not think much of Jimmy Carter, they do admire his wife . . .'.⁵ These and similar reports are spread from day to day by written and spoken media and have certain distinctive features, amongst others their uncertain and speculative nature, the fact that such reports can hardly be verified, but especially their negative and suggestive tenor. The critical reader or listener is, however, warned by words such as *cynics have been saying, there has also been comment, reportedly, most Americans apparently wish, there are even whispers, most voters, and it is believed, according to sources*, etc. But the fact is that these reports have been released, that damage has already been done, and that the journalist or speaker can seldom if ever be held responsible.

But how do these introductory remarks bear upon classical historiographers and biographers? There is a marked correspondence, more conspicuous perhaps than one is inclined to think, and the reason is that elements of uncertainty and

speculation, the problem of verification of allegations, and certainly the negative and undermining purport—all these occur, surprisingly often, in ancient historiography and biography, though from author to author this varies. Moreover these writers are betrayed by their use of certain typical words or phrases which may be divided into two basic groups i.e. impersonal expressions including words such as *rumor, fama, vulgabatur, creditum, dicitur* and λέγεται, ἔδοξε and φαίνεται;⁶ and secondly the use of unidentified spokesmen or an unspecified source such as *quidam tradidere, sunt qui ferunt, omnes, λέγουσι, ἔφασαν* and λέγεται. Who the 'some', the 'all' and the 'they' are, is never disclosed.⁷

Several questions may now be asked: Why does a writer resort to these usages? Is it merely because specific sources are lacking, or is it because of uncertainty about varying accounts, or may his aim perhaps be the subtle defamation of a character? In search of an answer to these and similar questions these usages were systematically analysed in a number of Greek and Roman historiographers and biographers. Each example of the two techniques, i.e. employment of the impersonal idiom and the unidentified spokesman, was recorded, and the information imparted by this means was classified as positive if it contributed towards the image of the individual concerned, as neutral if the image was unaffected, and as negative if the individual was prejudiced; wherever possible a reason was sought as to why the writer found it necessary to resort to these techniques.

The first author to be treated briefly is *Herodotus* who, in spite of his story telling propensity, is not an uncritical recorder of unreliable traditions of any nature. He is well aware of the varying merit of his sources, and even if he is not always at pains to select and eliminate, he frequently refers to their unreliability. An analysis of his first book reveals the following practices: In twelve cases the author explicitly gives his own opinion by using expressions such as ἐγὼ δοκέω (c. 51.3) and ἐγὼ λέγω (c. 75.3).⁸ He shows a marked predilection for vague general sources for instance in presenting conflicting opinions, e.g. οἱ μὲν Λακεδαιμόνιοι . . . αὐτοὶ δὲ Σάμιοι (c. 70.2);⁹ he uses similar phrases sixteen times. The impersonal form is used in ten cases, mostly λέγεται,¹⁰ whilst he quotes unidentified spokesmen on eleven occasions, e.g. οἱ μὲν λέγουσι . . . οἱ δὲ . . .¹¹ It is remarkable that Herodotus nowhere in Book I names a specific source, i.e. an author or spokesman. An analysis of the nature of the information provided by the impersonal idiom or by unidentified spokesmen discloses that the information he provides is never of a negative nature, in two cases it is positive and for the rest it is neutral, as for instance the description of Persian burial rites (c. 140.1) or the death of king Cyrus (c. 214.5). (For a summary of frequencies cf. Appendix.) To conclude: it may be stated that in the majority of cases Herodotus is comparatively certain that the information he imparts is correct, because he mostly provides neutral and harmless information, and is rarely engaged in characterization either of a negative or positive nature. This explains to my mind the absence of references to sources: When he uses the

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The mere reputation discretion in the spokesmen. His absolute accuracy avails himself of the remoter past must be sought.¹⁴ must be striven at states that with regard of what was actually even though the result aim? An analysis of his personal opinion called 'Ἀρχαιολογία and uncertain personal opinions.¹⁵ It is of times in the first to whom he refers (I.2) or a related but especially λations are used the is negative, in fact used no less than (II.102) and from reputation of a Spartan king.¹⁶ If there are no cases frank and merely (9x) or bad (5x).

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impersonal form or unidentified spokesmen it reflects uncertainty on the part of the writer: he merely transmits information provided by vague sources for what it is worth, fully aware that no one can be either benefited or underservedly harmed thereby.¹² His use of these techniques suggests caution where he feels unsure¹³ and he avoids defamation. Hereby his credibility and objectivity as a historian of the fifth century B.C. are enhanced in no small measure.

The mere reputation of *Thucydides* would lead us to anticipate the utmost discretion in the employment of the impersonal expressions and unidentified spokesmen. His approach is scientific and he declares that he strives after absolute accuracy (cf. τὸ σαφές, I.22.4). In writing contemporary history he avails himself of personal experience or of eyewitness accounts. In dealing with the remoter past his task is more difficult but a convincing proof (τεκμήριον) must be sought.¹⁴ If documentary evidence is wanting the probable (τὸ εἰκός) must be striven after—cf. his well known chapter on method (I.22) in which he states that with regard to speeches he endeavours to reproduce the general sense of what was actually said, and with regard to acts he strives after preciseness even though the result may be less attractive. To what extent does he achieve this aim? An analysis of the eight books of his *Histories* shows that he explicitly gives his personal opinion in fourteen cases of which eight are found in I. 1–23 (the so-called 'Ἀρχαιολογία)—no doubt because he reflects deeply upon the remote and uncertain past and he often explicitly presents his own well-considered opinions.¹⁵ It is of interest that in five cases only a specific source is named, three times in the first ten chapters of his work and with a single exception it is Homer to whom he refers.¹⁶ An impersonal form is used 28 times in all, often φαίνεται (I.2) or a related form such as φαίνονται (I.11), ἐφαίνετο (I.95; VIII.45), but especially λέγεται which appears in sixteen cases.¹⁷ When these expressions are used there is no significant negative or positive tendency: in four cases it is negative, in four positive but in 20 it is neutral. Unidentified spokesmen are used no less than 34 times, cf. expressions such as λέγουσι (I.138), φάσι (II.102) and forms of δοκεῖν or φαίνεσθαι, especially concerning the averred reputation of a person, as for instance the good reputation of Archidamus the Spartan king.¹⁸ It is mainly neutral information that is provided (20 times). But there are no cases of subtle exaltation or defamation of character; he seems to be frank and merely aims at transmitting what is generally accepted, whether good (9x) or bad (5x).

In all the impersonal and unidentified forms occur 62 times, 40 times with a neutral connotation, 13 times positive and only 9 times negative (i.e. 14.5%, cf. Appendix). In conclusion it may be stated that Thucydides uses these two methods comparatively rarely, and when they do occur the main reasons are firstly the non-existence or the author's ignorance of sources resulting in uncertainty about his information. His honesty urges him as it were to warn his reader whenever he provides information he cannot vouch for. A second important reason is that he often refers to a man's reputation amongst 'people', as illustrated above: It might be possible to detect in this an element of subtle

exaltation or disparagement, but on the whole Thucydides is true to his promise to be honest and he does not evade responsibility for his allegations by hiding behind an impersonal expression or an unidentified spokesman.

Xenophon is generally looked upon as an author inferior to Thucydides and lacking in the latter's intellectual depth. The discovery of a papyrus which provides a contradicting but clearly better rendering of some of his accounts has also brought discredit upon his reliability.¹⁹ Nevertheless there is a growing appreciation of *Xenophon* as historian especially as a result of the dissertation of Breitenbach.²⁰ A study of the seven books of his *Hellenica* leaves the general impression that *Xenophon* rarely refers to any source whatsoever. His narrative is seemingly that of an eyewitness who has no doubt about his information. A careful analysis reveals more specifically that the author seldom presents his personal opinion or impression in the first person: this occurs eleven times in all and in six cases he uses μοί / ἐμοί δοκεῖ.²¹ References to specific sources are even more rare than in his two predecessors: such a reference occurs once only when he states that the history of king Cyrus was recorded by Themistogenes (III. 1.2). Impersonal expressions and unidentified spokesmen occur altogether 56 times, especially the form λέγεται, as in VI. 4.5 where he states that Cleombrotus the Spartan was allegedly (ὡςπερ λέγεται) biased in favour of the Thebans.²² The form ἔφασαν is often used, in at least twelve cases, e.g. 'they said' the Theban army was despondent (III. 5.21), or VI. 5.29 where *Xenophon* says that 6000 Helots 'allegedly' reported for military service.²³ Forms of δοκεῖν occur ten times, often to state the nature of a person's reputation e.g. Dercylidas' good name: ἀνὴρ δοκῶν εἶναι μάλα μηχανητικός (III. 1.8), or the bad reputation of Phoebidas: οὐ μέντοι λογιστικός γε οὐδὲ πάνυ φρόνιμος ἐδόκει εἶναι (V. 2.28).²⁴ Of the 56 times these expressions are employed neutral information is imparted in 22 cases, 14 times it is positive, and—which is noteworthy—in 20 cases the nature of the information is negative, (i.e. 35.7%, cf. Appendix). Here we find a tendency which was lacking in the case of Herodotus and Thucydides, i.e. that in recording something negative about a person *Xenophon* either takes great care not to become slanderous, or he is not willing to be held liable for his statement and therefore takes cover behind unidentified spokesmen: When he wishes to state that Sphodrias the Spartan was bribed he adds 'presumably' (ὡς ὑποπτεύετο, V. 4.20), and elsewhere he says the Spartans 'were said' to have raped a number of girls (λέγονται, VI. 4.7). Alcetas is alleged to have been nonchalant in his relations with a boy (ἔφασαν, V. 4.57). Generally, however, the most important reason for the use of these devices is uncertainty on the part of the writer concerning information received which is often of a neutral nature. But often when a source cannot be checked the integrity of a person is affected and the devices serve as a means of evading responsibility. In *Xenophon* therefore we seem to be reminded of the difference between that which is 'truth' and that which is mere 'news' based on report.

In regard to the use of the impersonal idiom and unspecified spokesmen in *Roman historiography* I have restricted my investigation to the works of *Tacitus*

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as fairly representative. On account of expressions such as *secutus plurimos auctorum, celeberrimos auctores habeo, tradunt huius temporis auctores, sunt qui ferant* and *alii perhibent*, F.B. Marsh concluded that Tacitus' works are based 'on a real and serious study of the sources, both secondary and primary, and that they are the most reliable authority we possess for the period covered.'²⁵ However, in relation to all the sources of which he makes use, varying from earlier historians to documentary sources, Tacitus shows an exceptional predilection for rumours as is seen from expressions such as *traditur, ferunt, memoriae proditur, tradunt plerique* and *quidam tradidere*.

In the *Histories* it rarely happens that Tacitus comes to the fore to express his own explicit opinion; this occurs in three cases only.²⁶ References to specific sources are likewise rare: only Vipstanus Messalla (III. 25 and 28) and C. Plinius (III. 28) are named. However he readily employs the impersonal idiom and unidentified spokesmen; 82 such instances have been noted. He specializes in forms expressing 'belief', e.g. that it was believed (*credebatur*) that Antonius Primus time and again favoured the rising princeps (II. 86), or that it is believed (*creditur*) that Vitellius spent HS 900 million within a few months.²⁷ Other typical expressions vary from *nec deerant sermones* (I. 5), *rumoribus* (I. 13), *fertur* (I. 15) and *ferunt* (I. 17) to *fama constans* (I. 66), *alii tradidere* (II. 8), *ducebatur* (II. 31) and *nec defuere qui* (III. 78). But what is the nature of the information provided by this means? At times it is positive (12 of the 82 cases), for instance the *fama meliore* of Piso (I. 48), or Tacitus' statement that Suetonius Paulinus was regarded (*habebatur*, II. 32) as the most able general of his time, or that Musonius seemingly acted justly (*videbatur*, VI. 40). Often the information is neutral (26 out of the 82 cases observed) as for example where the inhabitants of Bedriacum tell of the appearance of the strange bird (*memorant*, II. 50), or when Tacitus says that Sabinus was believed to have committed suicide (*creditus*, IV. 67), or where he presents differing opinions concerning the origin of the Jews (*memorant . . . quidam . . . plerique . . . sunt qui . . . alii*, V. 2). But in the majority of these cases (44 of the 82, or 53.7%, see Appendix) these expressions are used when a person is portrayed in an unfavourable light, clearly illustrated by examples such as: 'All agreed' Galba was fit to reign as long as he did not reign;²⁸ or as said of Antonius, *nec deerant qui crederent* that he fomented mutinies with a view to his personal profit (III. 11); and *quidam tradidere* (III. 54) that Julius Agrestis was killed by Vitellius.²⁹ In the *Histories* there is thus an undeniable correlation between the employment of these expressions and negative character portrayal. The question may be asked, is this deliberate or mere coincidence? Amongst the various reasons for the correlation with negative character portrayal is the fact that specific sources are in fact lacking and that the author has to make use of general evidence. Occasionally when a person's reputation is concerned he presents an opinion which is so generally accepted that it would be ridiculous to look for a specific source confirming the allegation. Equally relevant is mere uncertainty and the speculative nature of his information. But most important on a general view is Tacitus' desire simply to impart negative or

slandrous information about a person which cannot be confirmed. He evades responsibility by entrenching himself behind the opinions of unidentified spokesmen. As compared with Herodotus, Thucydides and even with Xenophon it is hardly mere coincidence that of the 82 cases in which these devices were resorted to in the *Histories* of Tacitus, 44 correlate with negative portrayal.

If one analyses the ten odd books of the *Annals* a similar pattern presents itself: In six cases Tacitus explicitly propounds his personal view, for instance when he says he does not believe Poppaea was poisoned (*neque crediderim* . . . XVI, 6).³⁰ A specific source is named in nine cases, e.g. Tiberius' speech (II. 63), the *commentarii* of Agrippina (IV, 53), and the views of Fabius Rusticus, C. Plinius and Cluvius Rufus (XIII. 20). An impersonal form is used 50 times, especially the passive of *credere* (used impersonally in 12 cases), *constitit* or related forms, and also the passive of e.g. *ferre, habere, tradere, dicere, vulgare*, as well as *rumor* and *fama*. As in the *Histories* there is a marked inclination toward negative portrayal: In five cases only the information imparted by means of these expressions is positive, but in 26 cases it is negative, while 19 instances provide neutral information, probably a bona fide registration of uncertainty. What is of greater interest, however, is the discovery that the historian takes cover behind unidentified spokesmen 112 times and that in no less than 70 instances it is done in the process of giving a negative account of a person; 35 times the information is neutral and in only seven cases positive. Jointly these two techniques are employed 162 times in the *Annals*, 12 times the information is positive, 54 times neutral and 96 times negative, i.e. 59,2% (cf. Appendix). In the *Histories* it proved hardly possible to attribute this phenomenon to chance, and far less so now in the *Annals*. A tendency detected in the earlier becomes more marked in his later work.³¹ We must account therefore for the tendency as such as well as for the increased frequency. Closer scrutiny reveals that Tacitus rarely uses these techniques in his description of military matters. For instance a large part of *Histories* Bk. IV deals with the rebellion of Julius Civilis (cc. 13-37) in which no example of these practices occurs. They are equally rare in *Ann.* XII. 31-40 and XIV. 29-39 in which military affairs in Britain are described.³² But as soon as the scene moves to Rome and the attention is focussed upon the person and actions of an emperor or of important figures, the two techniques are copiously employed. The evident conclusion is therefore that these devices occur mainly in *biographical* and seldom in *historiographical* sections. Moreover, in the portrayal of certain emperors our statistics disclose a yet higher frequency in their employment, and it is noteworthy that almost exclusively negative qualities are revealed by these means: of 81 occurrences in *Ann.* I-IV 33 have to do with the portrayal of the emperor Tiberius. Only once is a positive quality recorded (III. 56); twice the information is neutral, but in 30 cases negative characteristics are dealt with. The presentation of Nero presents a similar picture: Of 48 occurrences in *Ann.* XIII-XV 19 are concerned with the portrayal of Nero of which three are neutral and 16 negative. Admittedly the traditional view of these two emperors is negative but this is to a considerable extent enhanced by

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The Germanicus effect of this technique: *crediderim mandata*) from Tiberius *occultus rumor* that Tiberius had difficulties in this position by Piso and Poppaea. Tiberius had difficulties in this position there was a *rumor* that Tiberius had difficulties (IV. 54). The informant is not mentioned; the source is *occulta* and *occultus*. A *rumor* that Tiberius is transmitted by an informant. The effect is achieved by an informant. Sejanus (VI. 11). Instantly in this way: It is suspected by the majority maintained (p. 51): Nero *creditus est* to (XIV. 65); *tradidere quidam* and *crebro vulgi rumor* high rank killed (XV. 1). 'sources' is unknown, the informant holds Tacitus accountable concerning the great *pervaserat rumor* (39), v.

We need not conclude of impersonal diction in cases of direct negative acceptance full responsibility that techniques are employed although the informant is not necessarily the true source, hesitation, an element of his source, he would have frequently does. In a similar way the onus of acceptance is argument that the emperor Tacitus' discreetness and them mainly when produced could have been so much

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The Germanicus episode lends itself in particular for illustration of this technique: *credidere quidam* that Piso received secret instructions (*occulta mandata*) from Tiberius concerning Germanicus (*Ann.* II. 43); there was an *occultus rumor* that Tiberius welcomed the undermining of Germanicus' position by Piso and Plancina (II. 55); everybody knew (*gnaris omnibus*) that Tiberius had difficulties concealing his joy at Germanicus' death (III. 2); and there was a *rumor* that Agrippina's death was being prepared by Tiberius (IV. 54). The informants are anonymous and the origin of the various *rumores* is not mentioned; the secrecy and subtlety of the suggestions is heightened by *occulta* and *occultus*. An indelible impression is made, a damning image of Tiberius is transmitted—but Tacitus evades responsibility for it. A similar effect is achieved by an incidental remark e.g. that *ceteri* hated Tiberius and Sejanus (VI. 11). Instances can be multiplied.³³ Nero too is subtly characterized in this way: It is suspected that illness was the cause of Burrus' death, but the majority maintained (*plures adseverabant*) that Nero had him poisoned (XIV. 51); Nero *creditus est* to have poisoned his two freedmen Doryphorus and Pallas (XIV. 65); *tradidere quidam* that Nero had poison prepared for Seneca (XV. 45), and *crebro vulgi rumore* Nero through jealousy and fear had innocent men of high rank killed (XV. 73). But the proofs are wanting, the identity of the 'sources' is unknown, the origin of the *rumor* is obscure—and yet no one can hold Tacitus accountable for laying these charges. In Bk. XV Nero's guilt concerning the great fire in Rome is suggested, but not explicitly stated: *pervaserat rumor* (39), *videbaturque* (40), *fuere qui . . . alii* (41) and *crederetur* (44).

We need not conclude that all negative characterization takes place by means of impersonal diction or unidentified spokesmen; there are indeed numerous cases of direct negative portrayal where the historian is evidently willing to accept full responsibility for information provided. The conclusion is, however, that techniques are employed by which the reader is cautioned as it were; for although the information may be news worth reporting and even sensational, it is not necessarily the truth at all. The use of these media reflects a moment of hesitation, an element of uncertainty in the writer: had he been able to vouch for his source, he would have done so by imparting his information directly as he frequently does. In a shrewd (one may say 'journalistic') way Tacitus transfers the onus of acceptance or rejection of the suggested portrait to the reader. The argument that the employment of these techniques is in itself an indication of Tacitus' discreetness and reliability is invalidated by the fact that he resorts to them mainly when providing negative information: it is hardly likely that he could have been so much more certain of the accuracy of his positive than of his

negative information.

The effect of the use of these devices on an author's credibility can be serious. He may manipulate his material and create impressions at will while he himself is technically protected. The ordinary reader will be successfully misled, but with the critical reader the writer's reputation will be adversely affected; and Tacitus by using these techniques has attained the opposite result of what he intended.

Our investigation will be incomplete if we do not briefly pay attention to the occurrence of these methods in ancient *biography*. One expects to encounter impersonal forms and unidentified spokesmen comparatively often in this genre because the biographer naturally has to make frequent use of illustrative and interesting anecdotes, traditions and general views which are largely based upon oral information.

We have analysed four representative biographies by *Plutarch* and four by *Suetonius*. In the case of the former biographer his *Antonius*, *Demetrius*, *Alexander* and *Caesar* were investigated, and the general impression is that Plutarch seldom refers to a specific source, except in his account of Alexander. For the rest, if a source is implied it is done by means of impersonal expressions or the unspecified spokesman. In the description of Mark Antony the biographer speaks in the first person in one case only (δοκῶ, 19.3). There are eight references to specific sources,³⁴ and he uses the two techniques in question 70 times in all, especially the words λέγεται (13x), δοκεῖ (16x) and various words of saying. The division of the cases is as follows: 10 positive, 26 neutral and 34 negative. Here too there is an undeniable correlation between negative portrayal and the application of these methods. It is noteworthy that in the depiction of Antony himself these methods are employed once only to provide neutral information, seven times for positive (especially with regard to his early career) and 31 times for negative information (i.e. 79.5%, cf. Appendix). The following are typical examples of the latter: We learn that Antony's habits were repulsive to 'the others' (τοῖς ἄλλοις 4.2); that he was popular with his soldiers but hated amongst τοῖς ἄλλοις (6.5); that he was unacceptable amongst men of good character;³⁵ 'people' were indignant (ἤχθοντο, 21.2) about what was happening in his household; and 'they say' (λέγουσι, 37.4) his preparations and his might were rendered powerless by Cleopatra. Admittedly Antony lends himself to unfavourable portrayal, but if he had really been as bad as Plutarch suggests, why does the biographer use the cautious and apologetic expressions so specifically when *negative* qualities are concerned?

Plutarch compares Antony with *Demetrius* but clearly has far less information about the latter at his disposal. This probably explains the numerous digressions and anecdotes about other people.³⁶ The total picture of Demetrius is not at all as damning as that of Antony, and the comparison is evidently forced. However, in this biography Plutarch gives his explicit personal view once only³⁷ and nowhere does he refer to a specific source. The impersonal and vague media occur 35 times, 10 positive (mostly regarding the good reputation of other people),³⁸ 18 neutral and only seven times negative, of which five concern

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Demetrius as for instance when his bad reputation for flirting is mentioned.³⁹ The explanation is partly that he was a better man than Antony, partly that he lived so many years earlier than Antony that a writer ran practically no risk if he were to record negative information directly—as Plutarch mostly does in this biography. The fact that λέγεται and λέγουσι occur far more rarely in the *Demetrius* suggests that written sources were more often used than in the *Antonius*.

In the *Alexander* Plutarch refers to specific sources on 32 occasions, evidently owing to copious material available.⁴⁰ The impersonal form and vague spokesmen do indeed occur 88 times but in the majority of cases (55) neutral information is imparted, and the use of these forms is clearly due to the uncertainty of the biographer. Alexander himself is from time to time depicted by means of these methods (46x), and in 12 cases the information is positive, in 26 cases neutral and in eight cases negative (17,4%, cf. Appendix).⁴¹ We are presented with a balanced portrait by an author who is not uncritical in depicting a virtuous person, but fully realizes that the subtle undermining of a man of such a good reputation would have little effect.

In the *Caesar* we find eight references to specific sources (in three cases works of Caesar himself) whereas the techniques in question are used 60 times in all, the information being of a positive nature in 18 cases, negative in 15 and neutral in 27 cases. Concerning Caesar himself positive information is provided 13 times, neutral 9 times, and negative 14 times, i.e. 38,9%.⁴² As in the case of the *Alexander* we have here a balanced portrait and the reason for the appliance of these techniques is uncertainty on the part of the biographer rather than an inclination either to exaltation or defamation.

My conclusion is therefore that Plutarch is balanced when depicting men who are relatively virtuous, but—and this is typical of human nature—whenever he portrays a character whose reputation is suspect (as in the case of Antony), additional disparagement is resorted to for the sake of sensationalism. But he takes cover behind impressions and opinions of 'people' and 'they', a technique which, as in Tacitus, furthers colourful representation.

I have analysed *Suetonius'* portrayal of Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius and Caligula—two traditionally 'good' and two 'bad' emperors. In his *Caesar* Suetonius quotes a specific source 11 times, and the information provided is predominantly negative (8x). This is his guarantee against criticism, as for instance when he quotes Licinius Calvus and Cicero concerning Caesar's homosexual relationship with Nicomedes.⁴³ Impersonal and vague forms occur 34 times, mostly (32x) in the portrayal of Caesar himself. In 12 of the latter cases the information is neutral, 18 times negative, and twice only is it positive.⁴⁴ There is thus an undeniable correlation between the application of these methods and negative portrayal. However, the fact that Suetonius quite often refers to specific sources, especially regarding negative information, is a proof of his cautiousness; I presume that this attitude explains why he, for want of specific sources, has recourse to these techniques of self-protection. Caution rather than subtle

undermining is therefore his reason for employing these methods in this biography.

In the *Augustus* sources are also often specified, 13 times with regard to the emperor himself.⁴⁵ In 29 cases the author uses impersonal or vague expressions, of which 18 occur in the depiction of Augustus. Once again there is a correlation between this usage and negative portrayal (4x positive, 5x neutral, 9x negative, i.e. 50%, cf. Appendix) but to a much lesser extent than in the other three biographies, the logical reason being that Augustus was traditionally a 'better' man.⁴⁶ About a person of such high repute there is no need to provide positive information in an indirect way, and therefore this happens on four occasions only. On the other hand Suetonius would obviously take care not to record any negative quality without reasonable grounds, and this explains why he applies this self-protecting technique in only 9 cases.

In the *Tiberius* these expressions occur 33 times, 20 times in the portrayal of Tiberius and the correlation with negative characterization is most conspicuous: 14 times negative (i.e. 70%), 4 times neutral and only twice is it positive.⁴⁷ In the *Caligula* the picture is as follows: These expressions are used 25 times in all, 10 times in the portrayal of Caligula, and all but exclusively (8x, i.e. 80%) in the recording of negative qualities.⁴⁸ It is striking that these usages rarely occur in a positive context or with a positive connotation. Because of his uncertainty Suetonius employs these techniques a number of times when presenting neutral information, but only twice concerning Caligula. The majority of negative details about Tiberius and Caligula are recorded directly and without any hesitation, but again the biographer seems inclined to present an even more despicable picture of characters who were traditionally 'bad', while taking cover behind spokesmen whose information cannot be verified.

In the works that have been analysed the great majority of information is provided directly with no mention of sources and without the aid of impersonal or unidentified expressions. Negative portrayal is clearly effected not only or even mainly by means of these methods. Owing to the fact that *Herodotus* applies these methods nearly exclusively in imparting neutral details his credibility and objectivity are enhanced. *Thucydides'* use of these media—here, too, mainly with regard to neutral information—must be seen as a warning to his reader in cases where he is unable to confirm this information, and thus his avowed integrity is upheld. In *Xenophon* there is an unmistakable correlation between these methods of portrayal and negative characterization and this means that the reader must be careful the moment one of these forms occurs. *Tacitus* is a master at the use of these methods which are largely restricted to biographical sections. His information may be worth reporting and even sensational, but he takes no responsibility for its truth and for this very reason his credibility is often seriously harmed. In *Plutarch* and *Suetonius* we have two cautious biographers, but both are inclined to yield to the temptation of portraying a person of questionable reputation in even darker colours than those for which they are prepared or able to accept responsibility.

The reader of Greek day publications—showing an impersonal form in a negative context. Because of the 'informed spokesmen' of a speculative nature, has an interesting and seem v

Frequencies of the use

Writer	Work
Herodotus	<i>Histories</i> (B)
Thucydides	<i>Histories</i>
Xenophon	<i>Hellenica</i>
Tacitus	<i>Histories</i>
	<i>Annals</i>
Plutarch	<i>Antonius:</i>
	<i>Demetrius:</i>
	<i>Alexander:</i>
	<i>Caesar:</i>
Suetonius	<i>Caesar:</i>
	<i>Augustus:</i>
	<i>Tiberius:</i>
	<i>Caligula:</i>

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The reader of Greek and Roman history or biography—but also of present-day publications—should therefore be forewarned: Be on your guard as soon as an impersonal form or an unidentified spokesman occurs, especially in a negative context. Be extremely careful of the 'they', of 'people', of the so-called 'informed spokesmen', or 'authorities', for what they allege is often of a speculative nature, hardly or not at all verifiable, and although it may be most interesting and seem worth reporting and reading, it is not necessarily the truth.

APPENDIX

Frequencies of the use of Impersonal Expressions and Unidentified Spokesmen

Writer	Work	Imper. & Unid. Forms	Pos.	Neut.	Neg.	Percentage neg.
Herodotus	<i>Histories</i> (Bk. I)	21	22	19	0	0
Thucydides	<i>Histories</i>	62	133	40	9	14.5
Xenophon	<i>Hellenica</i>	56	14	22	20	35.7
Tacitus	<i>Histories</i>	82	12	26	44	53.7
	<i>Annals</i>	162	12	54	96	59.3
Plutarch	<i>Antonius</i> : Total	70	10	26	34	48.6
	Ant.	39	7	1	31	79.5
	<i>Demetrius</i> : Total	35	10	18	7	20.0
	Dem.	13	3	5	5	38.5
	<i>Alexander</i> : Total	88	18	55	15	17.0
	Alex.	46	12	26	8	17.4
	<i>Caesar</i> : Total	60	18	27	15	25.0
	Caes.	36	13	9	14	38.9
Suetonius	<i>Caesar</i> : Total	34	2	14	18	53.0
	Caes.	32	2	12	18	56.3
	<i>Augustus</i> : Total	29	5	15	9	31.0
	Aug.	18	4	5	9	50.0
	<i>Tiberius</i> : Total	33	3	14	16	48.5
	Tib.	20	2	4	14	70.0
	<i>Caligula</i> : Total	25	4	11	10	40.0
Cal.	10	0	2	8	80.0	

NOTES

*This article is an elaboration of a paper delivered in Afrikaans during the biennial conference of the Classical Association of South Africa, January 1979.

1. *To the Point*, 15 December, 1978, 17. (The italics in the excerpts are mine.)
2. *Op. cit.*, 15.
3. *To the Point*, 22 June, 1979, 8.
4. *Sunday Times Magazine*, April 13, 1980, 3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Further *opinio, memoriae proditur, intellegeretur, habitum, traditur, constat, fertur, sermones* and *ἐλέγετο, ὡς ἔοικε*, etc.
7. Also *memorant, dicunt, credunt, plurimi auctores, gnari*, φάσι, εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ λέγοντες, etc. Forms such as *λέγεται* and *credebatur* should often be classified under this group even though they are translated impersonally, the reason being of course that they are literally personal constructions ('he is said . . . ; he was believed . . .'). The persons *by whom* it is said or believed are *not* identified, and therefore these expressions belong to the second category.
8. Cf. also *ὡς ἔμοι καταφαίνεται* (c. 58.1), *ὡς ἐγὼ πυνθανόμενος εὐρίσκω* (c. 105.3), *φαίνονται μοι* (c. 143.3), etc.
9. Cf. also cc. 20.1 and 171.2.
10. Cc. 140.1, 153.1, 187.5, 201.1, 214.1, etc.
11. C. 27.2. Further cc. 75.3, 201.1, 202.1.
12. Much of Herodotus' information about Babylon (I. 181 *sqq.*) is clearly first hand and so the impersonal and unidentified forms are used far less than for instance in the section dealing with the Massagetae (I. 201-216).
13. Cf. I. 160: οὐ γὰρ ἔχω τοῦτό γε εἰπεῖν ἀτρεκέως. So too I. 172.1.
14. I. 1; I. 19.
15. Cf. expressions such as *νομίζω* (c. 1) and esp. *δοκεῖ δὲ μοι* or a similar phrase (cc. 3, 9, 10, 22, 23).
16. I. 3, 9, 10; III. 104. In I. 97 he refers to Hellanikos but criticizes his inaccuracy.
17. Eg. I. 24; II. 18; III. 79; IV. 104; VI. 4.
18. *ξυνετὸς δοκῶν εἶναι καὶ σώφρων*, I. 79. Cf. II. 81 (*ἀξιούμενοι*) and VIII. 68 (*δόξαν*). By way of clarification it should be explained that forms of *δοκεῖν* or *φαίνεσθαι* which should clearly be translated 'according to their judgement/opinion', 'as it seemed to them', etc., followed by their action, are naturally left out of account, e.g. *δεινὸν ἐφαίνετο καὶ ἐδόκει* (II. 21), *ἐδόκουν* (III. 36; IV. 74), *ἐδόκει* (VI. 61).
19. P. Oxy. 842 (London), possibly the work of Cratippus of Athens. Cf. M. Grant, *The Ancient Historians*, London, 1970, 427, note 16. See also G.T. Griffith in *Fifty Years (and twelve) of Classical Scholarship*, Oxford, 1968, p. 197.
20. H.R. Breitenbach, *Historiographische Anschauungsformen Xenophons*, Diss. Basel, 1950.
21. E.g. V. 1.4; VI. 2.39; VII. 2.1 and 5.19.
22. Cf. II. 3.56; VI. 4.30.
23. Further II. 3.56; V. 4.57; VI. 2.6; VII. 4.40, etc.
24. Further I. 1.31; III. 1.3; III. 3.8; IV. 8.31; V. 2.37; VI. 1.2; VII. 5.16.
25. F.B. Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius*, Cambridge, 1930, 266.
26. *Ego reor*, II. 37 and V. 7; *Nobis . . . videntur*, II. 101.
27. Cf. also *credita est*, I. 78; *credidere plerique*, II. 99 and V. 22; *nec deerant qui crederent*, III. 11, etc.
28. *omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset*, I. 49.
29. Cf. *fama constans*, I. 66; *ducebatur*, II. 31; *ferebatur*, III. 6; *videbantur*, IV. 10; *plerique credidere*, V. 22.
30. Cf. *crediderim* in I. 76; III. 3; IV. 67. So too *mihi revolvo*, III. 18; *permoveor*, IV. 57.
31. 53.6% as against 59.2%.
32. Cf. *Hist.* II. 9-25 (East); *Ann.* IV. 46-51 (Thrace); XII. 10-21 and 44-51, XIII. 34-41, XV. 1-17 and 26-31 (East); XIII. 53-57 (Germany), etc.
33. Cf. *constat*, I. 13; *quidam tradidere*, I. 53; *alii . . . quidam . . . quoque*, I. 76; *credebatur*, II. 72; *fuere qui compararent*, III. 5; *creditum*, IV. 22; *neque dubitabatur*, IV. 70.
34. E.g. Octavius, 68.1; Nicarchus, 68.4; Aristophanes and Plato, 70.1.
35. τοῖς χρηστοῖς καὶ σώφροσι, 9.3.
36. Cf. cc. 11, 22, 24, 38.

37. I. 1, 4.
 38. E.g. *Mit*
 39. *κακῶς*
 40. E.g. *Er*
 20.9, 54.4 and 7
 41. E.g. *Pos*
δοκεῖ, 14.8; *λέ*
 42. E.g. *Pos*
 11.3; 15.1; *φά*
 43. 49.1, 3.
 44. Negative
 concerning *Ca*
 poisoned an in
 45. E.g. *Sue*
 46. E.g. *Pa*
existimaretur,
 47. E.g.: *Ne*
creditur, 52.3
 48. E.g.: *ur*
 had poisoned
 36.1, etc.

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constat, fertur, sermones

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5.16.

ec deerant qui crederent,

rbantur, IV. 10; plerique

8; permoveor, IV. 57.

and 44-51, XIII. 34-41,

que, I. 76; credebatur, II.
IV. 70.

0.1.

37. I. 1, 4, 6: μοι δοκοῦσι . . . ἡγοῦμεθα . . . μοι δοκοῦμεν.

38. E.g. Mithridates, 4.1; Philippides, 12.5; Krates, 46.2, and Patrokles, 47.3.

39. κακῶς ἀκοῦσαι, 14.4.

40. E.g. Eratosthenes, 3.3 and 31.5; Aristoxenus, 4.4; Onesicritus, 8.2 and 60.6; Chares,
20.9, 54.4 and 70.2; and especially the letters (7.7, 22.5, 27.8, 60.1) and diaries (23.4) of Alexander.

41. E.g. Positive: ὡς εἶκε, 21.7; φάσι, 43.1; λέγεται, 58.3. Neutral: ὡς φάσιν, 4.3; εἶκε, 7.5;
δοκεῖ, 14.8; λέγεται, 32.1, etc. Negative: λέγεται, 10.7 and 42.2; τινες, 75.5.

42. E.g. Positive: λέγεται, Suet. *Caes.* 3.2 and 50.4; εὐδοκίμων, 12.4. Negative: λέγεται, 5.8;
11.3; 15.1; φάσιν, 48.6. Neutral: λέγεται, 17.2; οἱ μὲν . . . οἱ δὲ, 53.5, 6.

43. 49.1, 3. Cf. also 9.2, 3; 30.4, 5; 52.1, 3; 56.1; 77.1.

44. Negative portrayal such as the following occurs time and again: There were rumours
concerning Caesar's relationship with Nicomedes, *non sine rumore*, 2.1; *creditur* that Caesar
poisoned an informer, 20.5. Cf. *opinantur*, 30.2; *constans opinio*, 50.1; *varia fama*, 79.3, etc.

45. E.g. Suet. *Aug.* 11.1; 27.2; 35.1; 63.2; 74.1; 77.1.

46. E.g. Positive: *satis constat*, 10.4; *fama*, 21.3; Negative: *rumor*, 11.1; *dicitur*, 13.2;
existimaretur, 70.2. Neutral: *ferunt*, 23.2; *traditur*, 80.1.

47. E.g.: Negative: *increbescente rumore*, Suet. *Tib.*, 11.1; *fertur*, 44.2; *satis constat*, 49.1;
creditur, 52.3 and 62.3; *putant*, 54.2. Neutral: *quidam putent*, 51.1. Positive: Only 9.2 and 10.1.

48. E.g.: *ut quidam opinantur* Caligula had poisoned Tiberius, 12.2; *quidam putant* that he
had poisoned his grandmother Antonia, 23.2. Cf. also *creditur*, 24.1; *alii tradunt*, 25.1; *fertur*,
36.1, etc.

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