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Creative Involvement with the Texts: 
Bernhard Goetz and the Ancient Historians
By Paula Beth Reiner
Hamilton College (Fall 1987)
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In the words of the famous Molly Malone, what any teacher wants is for the classics to be "alive alive-o." The question is: how? I hope Plato and Aeschylus, Catullus and Tacitus, will not be insulted by my posing the question. They are undoubtedly alive to us, who have devoted ourselves to reading the classics in the original. But for students new to the classics, able to approach them only in translation or wrestling with basic problems of language, the question does exist: how to make their experience of the classical texts a living one.

I was recently in the unusual position of replacing a professor who became ill mid-semester, and I was called upon to complete the Roman half of an ancient historians course with four days' notice. As I began gathering materials and "percolating" ideas in preparation, an assignment came to mind for which I thank the Muse. The hum of acceptance as I announced the assignment and the quality of the papers that resulted confirmed my suspicion that it had been the Muse at work. Students enjoyed working on this assignment because of its unusual approach, and they wrote papers that showed careful research and sometimes a wild sense of humor. The success of the assignment made me aware of an important method of bringing the classics to life: to involve students in the creative process of the author, so that there is a combination of creativity and identification.

The assignment:

Imagine that you are the author of a history of the United States, writing up the story of Bernhard Goetz. You read your sources first (as our ancient historians often did). Then you write up your story. Write at least one long paragraph (and no more than a page) in the style of each of our historians: Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus.

For each one of your samples, make a chart on a separate page, with columns for (a) stylistic or thematic features, (b) how those features appeared in your version, and (c) references for examples of those features in the text of the ancient historian.

Students were given as source material four pages of xeroxed articles about Bernhard Goetz.

I started the students off in class by taking about ten minutes to compose, with their suggestions, a Herodotean version of the story of Humpty Dumpty. The features students chose for our brief—and frivolous—version were:

(a) chattiness and interest in foreign customs
(b) the idea of hubris
(c) the consultation of oracles.

Our version ran as follows:
In the land of England, people were accustomed to eat their food with knives and forks, even in private and not just at fancy dinners. Another strange custom in connection with food was that they raised chickens and ate their eggs. But there was one egg that escaped being picked for eating. This egg grew and grew until it was the greatest of all eggs. With its great size came pride. It decided to climb the high wall that surrounded the Palace Park, even though it was forbidden. But first it consulted an oracle. The oracle said, "Who climbs that wall will become great." Not knowing that the greatness would be because of a fall, Humpty—

I deliberatedly chose a far-fetched and frivolous example because I wanted to encourage the students to be original and humorous, knowing that this would enhance their enjoyment and mine as well, as I read through the more than one hundred papers that were due. In my instructions, I included the following:

You may choose to present the whole story or only part. It is up to you; you are the author. You may do it realistically or fill in your own wild details—as long as you justify what you do with references on the chart. It's all right to have fun, and to give the reader fun, too! The grading will be based on (a) the thoroughness of your analysis and referencing and (b) the quality of your versions.

I knew that many good students would work hard on the documentation but might lack the talent or intuition to reproduce the ancient authors' styles, while other more artistic types would be able easily to reproduce the style without being able to document what they had intuitively reproduced. I wanted to be able to reward the latter while not penalizing the former.

As I expected, the papers I received covered a broad range: from careless versions with two features and only one or two references each, to highly polished (and some outrageously funny) versions, with three to four pages full of references for each author. There was great variety in the style and content of the versions. Some students did realistic, historical narratives, while others produced humorous fantasies, all illustrating the same basic features.

For example, one stylistic feature of Tacitus is the "devastating list," in which Tacitus completely blackens his subject with a brief but exhaustive list of negatives. The following examples are from Michael Grant's translation:

*Annals*, I.2, The legal system was "wholly incapacitated by violence, favouritism, and—most of all—bribery."

*Annals*, III.28, "Morality and law were non-existent, criminality went unpunished, decency was often fatal."

*Annals*, XI.21, "Surly though cringing to his superiors, bullying to his inferiors, ill at ease with his equals."

One student attempted to reproduce the devastating list in these words: "Bernhard Goetz, who was arrogant, foolish, and daring. . . ." Another student presented the same feature in a more humorous and more successful way: "Bernhard Goetz had obtained the right to call himself citizen of the United States, even though he had bad breath, long toe nails, and a deviated septum."

An ordinary short paragraph in the style of Livy might reveal many features. For example, one student wrote as follows:

I am told that it was just another ordinary night when a man by the name of Bernhard, son of Berni, stepped upon the subway. He was on his way to his parents' house to cele-
brate the festival of Easter. However, it has been said that he may have been out that
night to perform the cold-blooded act of murder. I find this hard to believe, for why
would a man of happiness and wealth want to kill? . . . It is my opinion that Bernhard
was going to see his parents.

For these few sentences the student cited as Livian features the interest in religious festi-
vals, the use of dual versions of a story with a verdict given, and the use of rhetorical ques-
tions to make a point—all with the proper references. The student might have added Livy's
typically Roman concern with ancestry, which he recognized intuitively, as shown by "son
of Berni." And finally, the student's version has Livy's quality of smooth narrative flow,
one aspect of the lactea ubertas that Quintilian recognized in Livy's prose.

For Thucydides, one student chose to portray the seasonal time-framework and the de-
tailed accounts of strategy and battle tactics, while another emphasized the debates. Others
picked up on the precision of his medical descriptions in the section on the plague:

(a) A Street envoy was sent to Vigilantes (Bernhard Goetz) asking for surrender or
war. Vigilantes refused to surrender and a fierce war broke out. After a few minor
incidents, the stage was set for the final battle.

The summer following the first skirmish, the warring factions (consisting of Vig-
ilantes versus four chosen Street Fighters) took their respective sides on the Sound off
Long Island. The Streets took the initiative and attacked in their rowboats wielding
sharpened screwdrivers. Thinking they had the advantage of surprise, the Streets had
not prepared for a counter-attack. But Vigilantes, using his superior naval intelli-
gence, manoeuvred around the Streets and attacked from the rear, wounding all four
once and one of them twice. Victory was Vigilantes', and he retreated to New Hamp-
shire for fear of further attacks.

(b) Following his actions, a huge debate broke out amongst the Yorkians as to what to do
with Goetzes. An assembly was called at once to express the opinions of both sides.
Benjimos Hookides, leader of the CIAFBI, arose and spoke to the assembly: "It was a
terrible act of injustice that Goetzes inflicted upon these four men of Yorkia. I believe
that Goetzes should be imprisoned to let others know that we will not stand for this type
of behavior." When he was done, the next to stand was Curtes Sliwasies, and he thus
spoke: "I have often been convinced that men like Goetzes should be allowed to take ac-
tions such as these. We must not fool ourselves about the questionable character of these
men and the position Goetzes was forced into. I believe that we should stand behind his
actions." Upon hearing the speeches, the assembly decided to let Goetzes' actions go
unpunished.

(c) . . . One man would have died if it had not been for the medical expertise of physi-
cians administering leeches to the leg . . .

(d) The muggers suffered severe gunshot wounds to the upper body and head, as well as
extreme loss of blood and contusion to the head . . .

I conclude with a humorous (and slightly censored) version of the Bernhard Goetz story
in the style of Herodotus, leaving the reader to discern the stylistic and thematic features of
the ancient historian:

These are the researches of Lincolnodotus of Hamilton. Bernhard Goetz, son of Karl
Goetz, son of Josef Goetz, son of Wilhelm Goetz, lived a middle-class life in New York
City. His father, Karl Goetz, had been forced to flee his home country of Germany when
it was found that he had very short legs, dirty laundry, and ate refried beans for break-
fast. His punishment was exile. Well, the youngest Goetz dreamed one evening that
he was traipsing nonchalantly through Greenwich Village, where he came upon a stoned street cleaner, who advised him to seek an old gypsy soothsayer named Clairvoya. In the morning, Goetz found Clairvoya, and she spoke thus to him:

You studly dude,
I am not rude,
But you must carry a gun,
Though it be not fun,
For if you are slack,
You will be attacked.

Goetz, thinking himself worthy of a gun permit, purchased such a firearm, ignoring the warning of the man behind the counter: "You must be careful with yon firearm, my son. Weapons are dangerous, and you may get yourself in trouble if you do not regard this pistol as a lethal weapon."

One day, while riding the underground choo-choo, Goetz was accosted by four young black men, all of whom hailed from the South Bronx, a vicious region where children eat nails for late night snacks. These four men, one 5' 4" 130 pounds, another 5' 6" 190 pounds, the third 5' 1" 320 pounds, and the fourth 7' 2" 89 pounds, carried sharpened screwdrivers in their jackets. Goetz shot all four men, believing that failure to do so could result in his own bodily harm. (He had been mugged once before.)

The story of Bernhard Goetz was chosen for its interest and social significance. (According to Lillian B. Rubin, author of *Quiet Rage: Bernie Goetz in a Time of Madness*, the Goetz case is one of the three landmark law cases in the social history of this century, along with the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the Rosenberg case.) But any issue that is current and of interest to students will do—for example, the Watergate scandal of the past or the recent saga of Oliver North. Many issues will be controversial, and students may be invited to insert their opinion, as the historians might have. In particular, many issues will, as does the Goetz case, provide fertile ground for some Tacitean pessimism.

The principle of creative involvement can be used in any number of ways for any ancient author. The Bernhard Goetz assignment gave scope for originality, individuality, and humor, which made the papers more enjoyable for the students to write and the instructor to read. Most important, by involving the students directly in the creative process, the assignment breathed life into the texts of the ancient historians.

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