Reflections of Blame; Tacitus' Characters and his Censure of Augustus

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in

the Department of Classics at Haverford College

May 2017
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Professor Scott without whose advising this thesis could never have reached its final form and Alice Hu and Professor Garett Fagan whose instruction and zeal inspired this paper’s beginnings. Finally, a thank you to Professors Bret Mulligan, Sydnor Roy, and William Tortorelli, and the many friends and family members who provided emotional support and advice during the difficult hours of writing.

Abstract

In his *Annals* Tacitus devotes himself to censuring Augustus through indirectly revealing the flaws inherent in the principate system which Augustus instituted. He devotes much of his Tiberian hexad to this end, turning the historical characters he is writing about into allegories for various problems he sees in the empire. Tiberius himself becomes a stand-in for the government as whole and it is to him that all of the vices trace back, while his mother Livia embodies the background corruption of the government. His adopted son and foil Germanicus represents all the positive qualities which Tiberius does not have, while Sejanus, Tiberius’ minister, comes to represent the breakdown of Roman social order. Together with the *vulgus*, a character that represents the fallout of these vices on the Roman people, these characters create a powerful invective against Augustus without ever speaking ill of the deified emperor.
Introduction

_Sine ira et studio_ is a phrase which has drawn censure for as long as scholars have read the _Annals_ of Tacitus. Some proclaim that these words are the heralds of a just and honest account of the early empire of Rome, while others see them as bold faced lies meant to hide the bitter and jaded man who is writing the work.¹ Still others see them as something which exists between the two, either an honest hope or a personal delusion.² It can be said, with some certainty, that whatever Tacitus’ purpose in writing that seminal phrase, the phrase itself does not hold true when his texts are examined with any degree of thoroughness. What appears at first to be a work of history becomes a work of rhetoric, weaving together historical details, rumors, and outright falsehoods into a tapestry of staggering complexity. The purpose of this work is something which has often been questioned, but to which no satisfactory answer has been given or, it is likely, ever will be. Without the knowledge of a Roman living at the very moment Tacitus put his pen to paper there will always be facets and subtexts which pass by modern readers. Without the full body of the work there will always be references and allusions which readers simply lack the corresponding parts of. And yet, this does not mean that such an investigation is without merit. Quite the opposite, the search for understanding opens new paths into Tacitus’ writing which may have been passed over time and time before.

To begin one such investigation perhaps it is most fitting to turn to Tacitus himself, who, if the entire passage is read, says _inde consilium mihi pausa de Augusto et extrema tradere, mox_

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² Christopher Pelling, in his chapter in the _Cambridge Companion to Tacitus_ is one scholar who falls into this camp during his discussion of Tacitus’ “voiceprint”.
Tiberii principatum et cetera, sine ira et studio.³ (Then it is my plan to relate a few end matters about Augustus, then the principate of Tiberius and the rest without anger or zeal) On an initial reading this statement seems clear enough, that Tacitus will relate events in chronological order starting with a little bit about Augustus’ reign. And yet, that is not exactly what the words say. He says he will relate pauca de Augusto, not principatum Augusti as we see in the next line with Tiberius. Tacitus here makes the claim that he is going to begin by telling a couple things about Augustus himself, the deified first princeps of Rome and as close to sacrosanct as a person could come in the Roman empire. He begins in this way, relating the events of Augustus’ death, but he does not stop there. With those words still ringing in their ears, readers enter the body of the Annals and soon read about Augustus’ funeral. A couple details are mentioned regarding the actual events of the funeral, but the entirety of chapters nine and ten of Book 1 are taken up with a debate in oratio obliqua about the merits of Augustus as a ruler. It is here where Tacitus first really reveals the lie of pauca de Augusto. The debate covers almost all the notable actions of Augustus’ reign, and his rise to power as Octavian, weighing out their positive and negative traits. In doing so Tacitus goes far beyond the government sanctioned version of events, as enshrined in the Res Gestae Divi Augusti, Augustus’ own written record of his rule and accomplishments and a self-assessment of his own success, which would almost certainly be called to the mind of any Roman reading this passage. Not only by the debate’s content, both documents contain lists of Augustus’ deeds, but also by its placement: Tacitus makes this debate occur at Augustus’ funeral, while the Res Gestae were displayed outside of Augustus’ tomb. Readers would find themselves both explicitly and implicitly sent to that document, comparing Tacitus’ text against Augustus’ own words and noting all of the discrepancies within. At this

³ Tacitus Ann. 1.1
point, Tacitus carefully removes Augustus from the narrative, just as he will do later with Livia, his point having been made. Yet, also like his wife, Augustus remains in the background, thoughts of him underlying much of the action in the work.

As mentioned before, the *Annals* are a rhetorically dense work and looking even just at the Tiberian hexad it can be seen that by structuring phrases, ordering events in specific ways, and magnifying certain details while ameliorating others, Tacitus creates a work in which his story serves two functions. On the one hand it tells the history of the empire while staying mostly close to the truth, but on the other, the characters of the hexad become as much symbols of the failings of the empire, as they are real people, the failings of an empire whose intrinsic vices come to the fore in the character of Tiberius himself, emperor and surrogate for the government he controls. By discussing these flaws Tacitus censures his true target, Augustus, by revealing his child, the Roman Empire, to be less a brilliant savior and more a sin-drenched beast.

It should come as little surprise that Tacitus resorts to using the character of men and women to make his points, as the author himself tells us that back when Rome was wise, men were called good who knew the natures of their fellows, but now no one remains to distinguish between good and evil.4 Before any analysis can begin, however, regarding the conclusions Tacitus lays beneath the surface of his work, it is important to look at the styles of rhetoric which Tacitus uses to implant these opinions and thoughts, and the myriad of tools which modern scholars have termed “Tacitean innuendo”.5 Though it is a topic about which many books and articles have been written, and whose full extent lies beyond the scope of this paper, a brief overview, building on those very works, will serve later discussions well. After this, I will move through the major characters of the *Annals*: Livia, Germanicus, and Sejanus, showing how each

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4 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.33
5 Ryberg, Whitehead, and Bews (discussing the *Agricola*) all use this term, among others.
of them connects to Tiberius, the most important character of all and the stand-in for the principate as a whole. With this done I will devote some last attention to the final character of Tacitus’ work, the vulgus, and show how it also demonstrates the flaws of the empire by showing the effect they had on its people. In looking at these characters, I will also show how Tacitus attacks Tiberius, and thus Augustus’ system and Augustus, on multiple fronts of major importance to the Romans: treatment of the army, through Germanicus mostly; foreign expansion policy, and, most importantly, the issue of the succession.

Tacitean Rhetoric

It is indubitable that Tacitus was well versed in the rhetorical arts, born as he was during a time in which rhetoric was the sole focus of most education. He would have learned, from a young age, the importance of how to construct arguments, defend assertions, and lead opinions. It is to this last skill that we see him turn time and again in the Annals. Tacitus carefully implants in his readers the thoughts and impulses which he himself believes, but never directly says them, leaving it instead to their discerning minds to work out matters themselves. One of Tacitus’ most common tools for this is his use of alternatives, specifically loaded to imply, but never state, his editorial claims. His methodology for doing this is no less diverse than in other rhetorical respects: often he presents claims as equal, but will spend a longer time speaking to one than the others, leaving readers with the impression that this, obviously, was the most important thing he said. In other instances he will devote equal time to both ideas, but build a further set of alternatives off of one of them, forcing the reader to implicitly assume the validity of that choice. In still other moments he carefully balances each choice so as to offer no possible guidance.

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6 Sullivan 326
While this may seem the “correct” path for an author to take, the effect in Tacitus’s writing is that, having been deprived of the guidance which they have come to expect, readers may be confused or feel slightly lost, a sense which almost always adds to whatever points Tacitus was trying to make.\textsuperscript{7}

While it may be his most common uses of rhetoric, weighted alternative is far from Tacitus’ only tool. In her article Ryberg provides a detailed overview of many of his other methods, such as: placing harmful or detrimental opinions in the mouths of others\textsuperscript{8}, tarnishing beneficial comments with immediate slanders or references to crime\textsuperscript{9}, and referring to rumors as established facts.\textsuperscript{10} Thus it is clear that Tacitus works on multiple agenda while writing, each one layered under those before it. Ryberg herself seems also to anticipate the very argument this paper seeks to make when she says, speaking of Tiberius, and Tacitus through him of Augustus, “the statement stops short of a full charge, and yet spares the emperor nothing of the guilt.”\textsuperscript{11}

Tiberius’ Afterlife in Other Sources

With rhetoric discussed at least momentarily it seems proper to turn our attention to Tacitus’ nominal subject: Tiberius, and through him Tacitus’ opinion of the principate as a whole. Tiberius, as the emperor, is intrinsically connected to his government, a connection which Tacitus exploits, casting on him the vices which come to be embodied in the government itself. What is striking about this portrayal is that Tacitus’ imagining of Tiberius in the \textit{Annals} is one

\textsuperscript{7} For more information about Tacitus’ use of alternatives see Whitehead or Sullivan’s exhaustive examination of exempla.
\textsuperscript{8} Ryberg 1942 386
\textsuperscript{9} ibid 386
\textsuperscript{10} ibid 389
\textsuperscript{11} ibid 385
which departs in dramatic ways from what readers can find in the other historians writing about this era. While writers like Suetonius and Cassius Dio note the same shift in Tiberius’ reign that Tacitus himself points out when the emperor withdraws the Capri, their characterizations of him are not as harsh as Tacitus’ own in the *Annals*. In her discussion of the posthumous accounts of Tiberius’ life Barbara Levick point out that Seneca reflects positively on the second emperor.\(^{12}\) Tacitus himself does not make Tiberius so despicable in his other works. In his *Histories* Tacitus has Mucianus, the governor of Syria, give a speech calling Vespasian to take the throne of emperor from Vitellius, and he calls it a disgrace that such a man should hold such an honored position.\(^{13}\) He goes to say that the army is not rising up against a good ruler like Augustus had been, or aged and clever Tiberius. There is no negativity in what Mucianus says, instead he uses Tiberius as an example of a positive leader, and one Vespasian should be emulating. Compared with the depiction given in the *Annals* this claim is very surprising coming from Tacitus.

It is not only in the historians that Tiberius is treated well, however, but also in official government practice. The *lex de imperio Vespasiani* grants imperial authority to Vespasian by connecting him to the earlier emperors of Rome. It is notable, however, that in this document those emperors whom history had vilified, Gaius and Nero, were not mentioned. Tiberius, however, was named, again holding him up as a positive model, akin to Augustus or Claudius. Furthermore, Buttrey points out that Vespasian, an emperor whose goal was to “explain and commend currently policy by linking it to the great past” and who often did so through the medium of imperial coinage, did not shrink back from reinstating Tiberian era types, but went

\(^{12}\) Barbara Levick, *Tiberius the Politician* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 221-222
\(^{13}\) Tacitus *Hist.* 2.52
so far as to use Tiberius’ own methodology at times when deciding what coins to put into circulation.\footnote{T.V. Buttrey, “Vespasian as a Moneyer,” The Numismatic Chronicle 12 (1972): 102. For more information and a full list of coin types re instituted by Vespasian see pages 92-94 of the same article.}

Considering these disparities it is clear that Tacitus is consciously choosing to depart from the accepted narrative and make Tiberius, and thus his government, appear as terrible as possible in this work in order to better censure Augustus. While there are many possible beginnings for the discussion of how he does this, it seems only fitting to begin with Tiberius’ own near fascination or reverence with Augustus, which Tacitus uses to demonstrate the entire system’s dependence on its creator, and his culpability for its failure.

Tiberius’ Relation to Augustus

One of Tacitus’ most discussed censures of Tiberius relates directly to his dependence on Augustus. In Tacitus’ own time under Trajan the empire was growing exponentially, dominating new province after new province, whereas Tiberius never allowed his generals to expand the empire, falling back time and again on Augustus’ final commandment to keep the empire within its current limits. No matter how certain a general’s victory seemed, Tiberius would not allow them it, such as when Germanicus, with whom Tiberius already had a bad relationship, one which will be discussed later, on the point of victory is withdrawn from Germany for made up reasons.\footnote{Tacitus Ann. 2.26} Tacitus claims the withdrawal is due to Tiberius’ envy of his adopted son, but also because he does not want to go against the things Augustus told him to do. Similar sentiments are expressed much later in the work when, in the fourth book, Tacitus begins his overview of
the empire by saying he will discuss *quae tunc Romana copia in armis, qui socii reges, quanto sit angustius imperatum*.16 (What then was the Roman supply of troops, who were the ally kings, how much narrower the empire) Here the comparison is even more pronounced: When Tiberius reigned and the empire was completely dependent on its forerunner, it floundered, and only now, under Trajan, begins to achieve its potential.

Tiberius’ use and almost need of Augustus again comes to the fore in the passage in the third book in which Tiberius responds to Silanus regarding his brother’s return to Rome that he: *sibi tamen adversus eum integras parentis sui offensiones neque reditu Silani dissoluta quae Augustus voluisset. fuit posthac in urbe eque honores adeptus est.*17 (Holds the grievances of his own parent, inviolate, against him (the brother), nor are the things which Augustus wished undone by Silanus’ return. After which he lived in the city, but did not hold office) Tiberius draws a clear distinction here between the laws and wishes of Augustus, but a careful reader will question which one he is granting more power to. Yes Decimus Silanus has been allowed back into Rome, but at what cost? Even in death Augustus kept him from attaining any public offices, severely limiting his options in life. Woodman comments that the use of *dissoluta* here, along with *integras* grants a “legal veneer” to Augustus’ wishes.18 Even in claiming that Augustus’ word is not law, Tiberius shows his own lies, revealing instead that the government he has come to embody honors the words of a man long dead over the letters of the law.19

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16 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.4
17 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.24
19 Many more examples exist of Tiberius invoking Augustus in this way than are either necessary or expedient to explain. See: Tiberius’ attempt to gain Nero the quaestorship (3.29), Tiberius attempt to deal with the request of a priest to hold provincial office (3.71), Tiberius claiming validity in a course of action because of Augustan precedent (4.16), and Tiberius about having temples built for himself (4.37) for a couple more notable moments.
One of the greatest proofs, however, of Tiberius’ willingness to copy his forebear, even into the depths of depravity, is shown in the fourth book when Tacitus tells of a speech Tiberius gave and says *ac si modum orationi posuisset, misericordia sui gloriaque animos audientium impleverat: ad vana et totiens inrisa revolutus, de reddenda re publica.*\(^{20}\) (And, if he had been able to moderate his speech, he would have filled the spirits of those listening with pity for him and glory. But he returned to the empty and completely laughable matters of restoring the republic) Tiberius had a chance for glory and gave it away to return to what Tacitus displays as an oft repeated lie of Augustus. The claims would have been absurd even in Tiberius' time, almost fifty years after Augustus took power, and even more so to those reading when Tacitus was writing, as it had been much longer for them and by that time it was obvious that the republic would never be reformed.\(^{21}\) In his *Life of Tiberius* Suetonius also makes mention of this claim, including a letter written from Drusus to Tiberius on the subject, but does not focus on it in the same way, or mention it as much, as Tacitus does, likely indicating that Tacitus had an additional purpose in mind while writing those sections.\(^{22}\) It is clear now that that purpose is to make Tiberius, and with him the whole of the principate, an extension of Augustus’ own failings, allowing them to be revealed and discussed indirectly.

The Dissimulation of Tiberius

Having looked at Tiberius’ dependence on Augustus, we turn our attention towards the man himself, and what Tacitus does with him to demonstrate the failings of the principate as a

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\(^{20}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 4.9


\(^{22}\) For an example see Suetonius *Tib.* 50.1
system of government. There is nowhere more fitting to start than Tiberius’ love of dissimulation and penchant for confusing and obfuscating the facts of any given situation. Cassius Dio, in his history, spends a good portion of the beginning of Tiberius’ section discussing the emperor’s *dissimulatio* and the results it had on the empire as a whole.23 Tacitus goes one step further than this exhaustive overview, inundating the entire book with dissimulation and uncertainty, creating for the reader an experience which, it can be supposed, was meant to reflect those uncertain and fear filled years of Tiberius’ reign. While Tacitus displays his rhetorical prowess throughout all of his works, it is in the Tiberian hexad that scholars find the most examples of innuendo and leading phrases, creating a work whose reading is very different than what modern readers might expect.

In regards to Tiberius himself there is a myriad of examples of his dissimulation and it is worthwhile to show how his motivations for engaging in such confusing speech change within each of the four fully extant books of the hexad, as each goes far in explaining the overall narrative of that particular book.

In the first book, it can be seen that Tiberius often hides his own desire, as was discussed earlier, to gain more power and fix his rule. This claim was one often made about Augustus as well and there is no doubt that, coming so recently from his rule, Tacitus intends to use this as a connection between the two men. Tacitus says earlier in the first book that Tiberius acted *tamquam vetere re publica et ambiguus imperandi.*24 (As though the old republic stood and he was uncertain of ruling) *Tamquam,* and words like it, quickly become buzzwords for Tacitus, marking out Tiberius’ hidden agendas and revealing his motivations. Even here, fresh to his throne, Tiberius has already begun with secrecy.

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23 Dio *Hist.* 57.1-3
24 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.7
This theme only grows as Tacitus nurtures the idea of the danger of understanding, that men who see through Tiberius’ dissimulation, and who teach this skill to others, soon become the foci of the emperor’s anger and hatred. A little later in the book Tiberius is put out after, having given a speech which carefully obscured his thoughts on the matter, he was questioned directly about his opinions. Tacitus makes certain at this point to show that Tiberius was percursus improvisa interrogatione. (shocked by the surprise question) The question itself, and its unexpectedness, have made him upset. Dio writes similar things, claiming that the only man who was safe during Tiberius’ reign was the one who could understand the emperor enough to see the proper course, and who did not make known this ability to others. And so Tacitus shows that, in this time in history, the usual course of events had become inverted and it was the most knowledgeable men who were the most in danger, allowing those who were foolish or easily swayed to prosper.

As the work transitions into its second book, Tiberius’ dissimulation remains constant, but its purpose changes. The second book, as will be discussed later, is far more focused on setting up Tiberius as the foil of his adopted son Germanicus and the conclusions Tacitus wishes to draw from that. To this end, his examples of dissimulation show Tiberius as someone now fixed, if not certain, in his power, and using his dissimulation to advance his own secret agendas.

In one section of the book Tiberius steps beyond the bounds of the laws in an attempt to aid his mother, a woman about whom Tacitus has very little good to say and whose character will be discussed soon enough. In the section in question a friend of Livia’s has been called into court and Tiberius offers to defend her. On the way to the courthouse, however, he delays in

25 Tacitus Ann. 1.12
26 Dio. Hist. 57.1
27 Tacitus Ann. 2.34
order to buy his mother enough time to gather the money to pay her friend’s debts. Such a delay in proceedings is something that would likely have been criticized in normal citizens, but was allowed to pass in regards to Tiberius due to his position. And so, cloaking his actions in a thin veneer of obfuscation, Tiberius furthers his mother’s and his own agenda. For Tacitus, this story works on two major levels, first demonstrating again Tiberius’ dissimulation and the effect it has on the government on a whole, but showing also the way that the principate has come to place friends of the emperor and his family above the rest of the citizenry, a fact which will bear more on this discussion later.

In another notable passage, Tacitus reveals the solution to the aforementioned danger of understanding: free will as a show of flattery. The senators jockey amongst themselves, attempting to interpret Tiberius’ wishes, then offer them without prompting before anyone else can, thus allowing the emperor to both succeed in his goals and keep the fact that they were ever his goals completely hidden. Tacitus says as much when he writes that, in order to weaken Gallus speciem libertatis Piso praeciperat.\(^{28}\) (Piso preempted a show of liberty) Piso, here Gnaeus Piso whose importance to the story and the character of Germanicus cannot be underestimated and will be examined soon enough, preempts his opponent from making a speciem libertatis in order to gain Tiberius favor. Furneaux here claims that such liberty is “the newest form of flattery”, a fitting approximation as it has only become viable in the reign of such an obscure leader.\(^{29}\) Once the Republic respected men who stood up for their beliefs, but Augustus broke them of that, turning them into men in servitude, a servitude which Tiberius reveals through his own deceptions.

\(^{28}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 2.35
\(^{29}\) Henry Furneaux, *Annalium A Excessu Divi Augusti Libri* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891) 294. See also Holbrooke’s note at the same place.
As they learn to navigate the waters of Tiberius’ own dissimulation, the people of the Roman empire, and even those kingdoms beyond its bounds, learn to employ dissimulation to their own benefit. This can be seen in another section involving Piso who becomes an arm of Tiberius’ corruption, turning even good soldiers to criminal behavior and dissimulation.\textsuperscript{30} Even foreign kings have begun to use Tiberius’ methods, as when Tacitus tells readers that the king Rhescuporis pretends war against other nations in order to hide his bolstering of his own forces.\textsuperscript{31} The taint of Tiberius’ vice has begun to spread beyond the boundaries of one man, into his symbolic role as the empire itself, and is now touching every life, foreign and native born.

This trend continues in the third book of the hexad, a book focused not on Tiberius’ interactions with any other specific character, but on the overall character of the empire and the events transpiring within. In this book Tiberius employs his dissimulation in order to maintain chaos in the goings on of the empire, and thus maintain a firmer control over events. The very first mention of Tiberius in the book indicates this, saying that 

\textit{aberat quippe adulatio, gnaris omnibus laetam Tiberio Germanici mortem male dissimulari}.\textsuperscript{32} (adulation was absent, since all knew that Tiberius’ joy in the death of Germanicus was badly hidden) Tiberius should mourn his adopted son’s death but, for reasons that will be discussed later, rejoices in it, applying only the lightest dissimulation to that fact.\textsuperscript{33}

In a society where laws were once made by suggestion alone, Tiberius’ personal feelings, and any attempt to hide them, had incredible impact on the society, but Tacitus demonstrates this confusion even in purely legal contexts. During the trial of Lepida, Tacitus relates that \textit{haud...}

\textsuperscript{30} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 2.55
\textsuperscript{31} Tacitus \textit{Ann} 2.65
\textsuperscript{32} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 3.2
\textsuperscript{33} Martin and Woodman note in their commentary (1996) on this section that, although Germanicus and Agrippina are the main focus on the first section of the book, the focus is still completely on Tiberius.
facile quis dispexerit illa in cognitione mentem principis: adeo vertit ac miscuit irae et clementiae signa.\(^{34}\) (Not easily could someone see the mind of the princeps in that deliberation, so much did he turn and mix the signs of clemency and anger) The word dispexerit is important here, referring to “seeing through a dark or dense medium”, indicating that Tiberius was hiding his actions even more than usual.\(^{35}\) Given that the trial is one regarding maiestas, the importance of which and Tacitus’ feeling about which will be discussed later, this is a place in which Tiberius should, if ever, be clear, but instead he makes himself as unreadable as possible. By doing so Tiberius undermines much of the legal system at this time, which depends on him leading the way as Augustus once did.

**Tiberius, Dissimulation, and the Succession**

Another important place where Tiberius cloaks his intentions when he shouldn’t is in regards to the succession. The succession is, for most authors, a source of contention regarding the principate. A confusing system, and one which is never well defined, it is held onto only because it is the mos maiorum. Tacitus’ dislike for the familial succession is clear from the speech of Galba in the *Histories* when he discusses giving the principate to Piso. He claims that where Augustus sought for a successor within his own house, he looks throughout the world, since he himself came to power from outside of that family.\(^{36}\) He discusses in great details the flaws of Augustus’ system, and how the best men should be chosen, not from a single line, but from the whole of the empire. Living in the beginning of the Adoptive Dynasty, Tacitus has seen

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\(^{34}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 3.22  
\(^{35}\) Woodman and Martin 1996, 214  
\(^{36}\) Tacitus *Hist.* 1.15-16
that such a system can work and uses the events of his modern age to inform the words of his speaker.

He does much the same in the *Annals* but more implicitly, by showing the intrinsic failings of the family method. In section thirty-one Tiberius begins the year by retiring from Rome and Tacitus provides two possible reasons for this: either, to rehearse for his longer departure in book four, or to allow Drusus a time for political glory by managing the consulship alone.\(^{37}\) Unlike in most of the instances where Tacitus presents such a choice, in this one he provides no guidance on which is the actual reason. The result of this is confusion as to whether or not Tiberius is using this moment as a chance to set Drusus up as his successor. The succession itself was fraught with difficulty at this moment, already uncertain due to its rough beginning under Augustus, as evidenced by his difficulty in finding a suitable heir. As such this is a situation in which Tiberius should be absolutely clear as to his intentions in order to prevent making an already confusing situation more so, but instead he does the exact opposite. Between these two examples Tacitus demonstrates another of the great flaws of the principate as set up by Augustus: the smoothness of its legal workings depend completely on the whim of a single man and, if that man wishes to, it can quickly be thrown into disarray.

As before, this problem is no longer limited to Tiberius, and has begun to spread throughout the imperial government. When discussing actions taken by Drusus Tacitus says *neque dubitabantur praescripta ei a Tiberio, cum incallidus alioqui et facilis iuventa senilibus tum artibus uteretur.*\(^{38}\) (Nor was it doubted that these things were instructed to him by Tiberius, since someone open and with a youthful temper then made use of the arts of old man) Drusus here has become infected with his father’s vices and, since he soon is shown as a contender for the

\(^{37}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 3.31
\(^{38}\) Tacitus *An.* 3.8
position of heir-apparent, represents the likelihood of those vices continuing into the next generation. Woodman also points out that the idea here of an “old head on young shoulders” would usually be construed as a positive thing, but the context of that old head being Tiberius’ changes this moment of praise into one of censure.

Tiberius’ Fear and Timidity

Though Tacitus takes care to come back often to Tiberius’ dissimulation, it is by no means the only arrow he levels at the emperor, and through him his forerunner. Throughout the first half of the hexad, and especially in the first book, Tacitus characterizes Tiberius as ruled by fear and slow to take actions, a character trait which becomes all the more terrible when applied to an entire government.

One of Tiberius’ most common responses to these situations of fear is to hand off his control to another individual or group that he can then make responsible if things should go wrong. Early in the work Tiberius sends Drusus to Pannonia in order to put down the revolts going on there, but Tacitus says of the event that *nullis satis certis mandatis, ex re.*39 (Nothing was sufficiently mandated from the king) While he took the action of sending Drusus, he gave no explicit instruction or remedies, making Drusus as good as useless to the people he had been sent to. Or, often, Tacitus shows Tiberius handing off decisions to the Senate, such as he does in response to the same set of uprising.40 Holbrooke, in commenting on this passage, goes so far as to say that

39 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.24
40 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.25
Tiberius uses the Senate as a “convenient tool” and one which carries with it a threat of punishment, though again Tiberius does not dare to take action and outright threaten the rebels.\(^{41}\)

It is not only by handing off his responsibilities that Tiberius avoids taking action, however. He often employs his characteristic dissimulation, mixing together something already dangerous to the empire with another poison. Regarding the rebellions, both in Pannonia and Germany, he eventually realizes that his own presence may be required to end them, however he does not dare go in case the soldiers attack him or he slights Drusus or Germanicus by favoring the other. Tacitus explains further, *ceterum ut iam iamque iturus legit comites, conquisivit impedimenta, adornavit navis: mox hiemem aut negotia varie causatus primo prudentis, dein vulgum, diutissime provincias sese litt.*\(^{42}\) (Then, as if about to go, he collected companions, gathered provisions, and outfit ships. Soon he fooled first the prudent, then the people, and lastly the provinces for a long time with winter, or business as contradicting excuses) Tiberius does everything he can to appear as if he is just on the point of departure, but then delays again and again, giving hope to his citizens that this matter will soon be resolved, and anger that it has not yet been, along with confusion.

Tacitus makes a point to show that these delays and hesitations are not without their costs. In the third book he says explicitly, regarding how to treat a outbreak of revolts *consultus super eo Tiberius aspernatus est indicium aluitque dubitatione bellum.*\(^{43}\) (Asked about the matter Tiberius spurned the charge and with hesitation fostered war) Woodman and Martin note that the word *dubitatione* used here is most often used in connection with Tiberius, three out of the four

\(^{41}\) George Otis Holbrooke, *The Annals of Tacitus* (London: Macmillan, 1882) 21. For another demonstrative instance of Tiberius’ willingness to hand over his own work see Book 2 Section 40, regarding the matter of the fake Agrippa, which Tiberius finally hands off to a senator since he is unable to decide what to do.

\(^{42}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.47

\(^{43}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 3.41
times in the *Annals*, and usually means “hesitation” or “doubt”.\(^{44}\) Although it occurs much later in the work than the other examples, Tacitus brings to the fore here the conclusion that he has been dancing around for many chapters, that Tiberius’ natural cowardice and hesitation have disastrous results for the empire, and that a government which allows one man’s uncertainty to begin an entire war is deeply flawed.\(^{45}\)

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**Livia as a Source of Corruption**

These things compel us to ask, if Tiberius is so often slow to act and hesitant, where is it that Tacitus sees so much of the terror of the Tiberian era coming from, especially in the first book? The answer can be found very close to the beginning of the text, when he says that *vixdum ingressus Illyricum Tiberius properis matris litteris accitur.*\(^ {46}\) (Soon Tiberius, progressing towards Illyricum was called back by a letter from his own mother) The relationship between Tiberius and his mother Livia is one which Tacitus discusses at great length as he transforms her from the wife of the last emperor into an embodiment of corruption and the willingness to grab for power which soon comes to dominate the empire.

Livia’s introduction comes with death. Near the beginning of the *Annals* Tacitus relates the deaths of Lucius and Gaius Caesar and says that *et vulnere invalidum mors fato propera vel novercae Liviae dolus abstulit.*\(^ {47}\) (Ill-timed death carried them away either by a fated wound, or a trick of their stepmother Livia) Several important things occur in this passage, which combine to

\(^{44}\) Woodman and Martin 1996 341

\(^{45}\) For another example of Tiberius’ delay bringing about misfortune see *Ann.* 1.49.

\(^{46}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.5

\(^{47}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.3
form a very negative image of Livia’s character, even though she has not yet been introduced to the narrative. First, if it is assumed that Tacitus has stuck true to his usual style of rhetoric, he supports the second choice of these two. Additionally as Furneaux points out, Tacitus choice of language here is very telling as fatō is often opposed to violent death. This combined with his emphatic use of novercae is meant to build the scene into its most horrifying form: two young men, murdered brutally by their own step-mother.

Almost immediately after this Tacitus says that Tiberius is placed in his position of succession non obscuris, ut antea, matris artibus, sed palam hortatu. (not by his mother’s hidden arts, as before, but with open requests). The rhetorical effect of this placement is immense. Foremost it builds off the earlier phrase, one of Tacitus’ common tactics, forcing the reader to subconsciously accept Livia’s involvement even if he hadn’t before. Additionally, it plants in the reader’s mind the idea that Tiberius’ power and Livia are directly connected, a strong outline for the things to come in the next several chapters. In doing this Tacitus both begins and completes the connection of Livia’s scelestae nature to the political regime, only to build upon it later by further defining the terrible person Livia was, and everything she represents in his narrative.

Another way in which Livia’s power over her son and Rome’s political life is demonstrated is in her control over the fates of specific individuals, both openly and in hiding. Before Augustus’ death Tacitus relates a rumor regarding the death of Fabius Maximus. Two points of this story rhetorically link it, whether true or not, to Livia’s nature. First the story is told because, regarding Augustus’ worsening condition, some citizens suspectabant scelus uxor is. (suspected the crime/poisoning of the wife) The use of suspecto here is notable as it has two

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48 Furneaux 156
49 Tacitus Ann. 1.3.3
possible meanings, first its English cognate to suspect or consider what is likely. However, the secondary meaning is to notice or discern, which holds a different rhetorical implication. It is likely that Tacitus meant both of these meanings at once, the first as the obvious meaning of the sentence, but the second as an echo in his readers’ ears that made them more likely to consider the other pieces of Livia’s story more negatively. Additionally the use of the word scelus is notable as it can denote a trick, but also specifically a poisoning. The use of such a term sandwiched as it is between an account of dying man and a dead man has obvious implications which cast aspersions on Livia.

Openly Livia’s control of human life is no less telling about her position in the city. A man by the name of Haterius roused Tiberius’ anger and it seemed likely that he would be killed so, as a last resort, Tacitus tells that *Haterius Augustam oraret eiusque curatissimis precibus protegeretur.* (Haterius beseeched Livia and was protected by her most caring prayers) What is the most interesting about this passage is not that Haterius goes to Livia, but that she is in fact able to protect him. As both emperor and the most important man of the family, Tiberius should have control over his step-mother, and yet she is able to step in and protect another man from him. Tacitus shows here that true power, at this point in the empire, does not rest with the political regime but with those behind the scenes who orchestrate events.

All of this is drawn together in a scene which can be taken as Livia’s crowning achievement, the death of Augustus. As mentioned before it was already implied that Livia through some trick or poison had prepared her husband for death. It is then that Tacitus says that

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50 See Goodyear, Furneaux, and Holbrooke’s notes on this line.
51 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.13.6
52 For another example of Livia’s ability to preserve the lives of those who should die see the trial of Piso and his wife, whom Livia saves even though the weight of opinion says that she was responsible for the death Germanicus.
53 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.5.3
Livia summoned Tiberius to her side with a letter. It is important to note that Tacitus is very certain to say that it is Livia, not Augustus, who summoned Tiberius. Already she holds control.

After his arrival Livia cordons off the house, and sends out news at intervals. Throughout this whole story Tiberius takes no actions except to do what Livia tells him to do, eventually culminating at the end of chapter five in his ascension to emperor. By having such a momentous event occur in such charged circumstances Tacitus makes it clear to careful readers who is truly in control. After this point, when Livia is set in readers’ minds and what she symbolizes is understood, Tacitus withdraws her from the story and she does not appear again in the first book. This fact, also, is important to remember, that only readers actively thinking about Livia will note her absence, much like citizens of Rome would be unlikely to note the presence and absence of everything she has come to symbolize in the political sphere, and yet it was always present just behind the curtain. Tacitus has done much the same thing to Augustus in the *Annals*, no longer present, but just behind the curtain.

Tacitus follows through on these ideas in later books by returning to Livia in subtle ways and slight references. In book two Tacitus tells that Tiberius caught *Archelaum matris litteris, quae non dissimulatis filii offensionibus clementiam offerebat, si ad precandum venire*.54 (Archelaus with a letter from his mother who, not hiding the angers of her son, offered clemency, if he came to ask for it). Livia’s power over life and death, mixed with the *dissimulatio* now common to the empire, provides the bait that draws Archelaus into Rome. Even though she has no true place in the government, she has the power to offer clemency and have that offer be believed, underlining starkly her unique and terrible position. In book three Piso makes certain to say *deos immortalis testor vixisse me, Caesar, cum fide adversum te neque alia in matrem tuam*

54 Tacitus *Ann.* 2.42
pietate.\textsuperscript{55} (I swear to the immortal gods, Caesar, that I lived with fidelity not against you and with piety not against your mother) He claims loyalty not only to Tiberius, as would be expected, but also to Livia, trying to extricate himself from his predicament as his wife did. To his own detriment, however, invoking Livia’s name is not enough, for her power must be willingly exercised and she does not wish to spare him.

It is clear that Tacitus had a specific goal in mind when creating the character of Livia. He formed a woman who is introduced with death and crime, and whose every action has power over life and death, always acting behind the scenes. More than this, Livia becomes a stand-in for the overall corrupting influences of the empire, always grabbing for more power, tying themselves tight to the emperor, and treating the regular population like pieces in their games.

Her place in the story is not a secure one, however, and by the end of the third book Tacitus foretells a change coming, when he says that idem tempus Iuliae Augustae valetudo atrox necessitudinem principi fecit festinati in urbem reditus, sincera adhuc inter matrem filiumque concordia sive occultis odiis.\textsuperscript{56} (At this time a terrible sickness of Livia made necessary a swift return to the city for the princeps, still then sincere the concord between mother and son, or with hatreds hidden) Woodman and Martin point out that several pieces of the second part of the sentence form what they refer to as a “temporal innuendo” foreshadowing that the concordia between Tiberius and his mother will not last much longer.\textsuperscript{57} Soon enough Livia is supplanted by Tiberius’ own corruption and anger, and by his minister Sejanus. Having lost her symbolic status, she soon fades from the story and is rarely mentioned.

\textsuperscript{55} Tacitus Ann. 3.16
\textsuperscript{56} Tacitus Ann. 3.64
\textsuperscript{57} Woodman and Martin 1996, 447
Tiberius’ Anger

This is not to say, however, that Tiberius himself never exercises corruption. On the contrary, Tacitus makes it a point to show the dangerous fury residing within Tiberius and thus within the entirety of the principate. Having just come from the reign of Domitian, whose anger he immortalizes in his Agricola, Tacitus knows well that emperors using their position to lay waste to those who oppose them is not something which will go away. So throughout the hexad Tiberius’ fury, and its terrible repercussions, are often given center stage, though their nature changes subtly between each book as Tiberius matures in his role.

In the first book, Tacitus makes a point of showing how Tiberius’ uncertainty and discomfort in his position lead him to anger against those around him. Near the end of the book Tacitus gives a clear look into Tiberius’ thoughts about Agrippina, whom he characterizes as seeking military favor and displaying her son, Gaius, to the army in hopes of exalting him, his father, and herself. The tumultuous oratio obliqua gives a glimpse into a mind tossed about by fear, a fertile ground for anger and hatred. As Holbrooke notes, this image is one which Tacitus make explicit in his next sentence by saying that Sejanus sows the seeds of anger, willing to wait for Tiberius to bring them forth when they are ready. At this point Tiberius’ anger is one predicated, most often, on his fear, but in the second, and especially the third books this changes as Tiberius becomes more and more a set in his rule.

When Tiberius turns his anger against Drusus Libo in the second book, he finds himself blocked by certain laws regarding the torture of slaves. In order to circumvent this, he orders the slaves sold off, so that he can torture them and add their testimony to the trial. Tiberius’ anger

58 Tacitus Ann. 1.69
59 Holrooke 47, see also Furneaux 242
has finally begun to break free. Once uncertain, he now orders a practice, which Tacitus claims he invents, so that he can attack Libo with no delay. In response Tacitus calls him *callidus et novi iuris repertor Tiberius.*\(^6^0\) (Shrewd and a creator of a new law) What is most notable, however, and what it is likely other Roman’s would have known, is that Tiberius did not, in fact, invent this practice, Augustus did. Dio himself writes this, which begs the question of why Tacitus attributes this contrivance to Tiberius.\(^6^1\) It seems likely that Tacitus does this to connect the anger of one man and the contrivances of another. In doing so he creates a symbolic bridge, where the second builds upon the work of the first, creating something more terrible than either man could have done alone. In this, Tacitus echoes his thoughts about the principate as a whole, laid down by Augustus, then nurtured to greater levels of corruption and terror by Tiberius and those emperors who followed him.

In the third book Tiberius’ anger finally breaks free completely, no longer fettered by worry now that Germanicus is dead. Worse, Tiberius goes a step farther, not only allowing his anger full reign, but now mixing it with his dissimulation, creating a society in which destruction may be visited on you at any moment as suddenly as lightning from a clear blue sky. For just one example, after the trial of Lepidus, Tiberius praises the senate for their actions, but rebukes them for needless haste, instituting a rule that there must a nine-day period between condemnation and sentencing. Tacitus then tells his readers that this was to no avail, since the Senate could not rethink and Tiberius never softened his anger.\(^6^2\) Tiberius institutes a law, and then never allows it

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\(^{6^0}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 2.30  
\(^{6^1}\) Furneaux 288, see also Holbrooke 73  
\(^{6^2}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 3.51
to come to any use. Tacitus again shows his readers the inherent dangers of the principate, a system of government that rests upon the whims of one man and his natural impulses.

The *Maiestas* Trials

It would be wrong to address Tiberius’ natural anger without also mentioning Tacitus’ single most recurrent and fierce attack upon him: the *maiestas* trials. Tacitus’ frequent mentions of the court of *maiestas* are always filled with bile and he uses them as a perfect stage on which to display Tiberius’ natural evil. Tacitus makes this clear from the very first mention of the court when he says he does not shrink back from relating the events *ut quibus initiis, quanta Tiberii arte gravissimum exitium inrepserit, dein repressum sit, postremo arserit cunctaque corripuerit, noscatur.* (in order that it be known from what beginnings, and by what art of Tiberius the gravest destruction crept in, for a time was repressed, then blazed forth and overturned all things)

There are several notable sections of this sentence that make clear his opinions on this court, its overall place in the empire, and Tiberius’ culpability in the events that surround it. First and foremost he refers to the court as *gravissimum exitium*, the gravest ruin, a phrase which may come as somewhat of a surprise in that it is technically being applied to a law. It makes clear that this is not a law which Tacitus believes has any place in a civilized society, and which stands for all of the terrible fury inherent in the Roman principate. As to Tiberius, although Tacitus inundates this passage with blame for him, it is best summed up in the phrase *dein repressum*. In

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63 For an in-depth discussion of the trial and Tiberius response see Woodman and Martin 357-359.
64 The idea of Tiberius’ hidden anger is one which comes upon again and again. For more examples see: The trials of Haterius and Saucurus 1.13, Tiberius ability to prevent the wrongdoings of Libo 2.28, and in 3.65 Tacitus calls him a man “opposed to civil liberties. Also Tiberius’ dislike of attending the theater in 1.76 Holbrooke claims to be an “indication of hidden hatred of the human race” during this era.
65 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.73
his note, drawing on Walther, Furneaux point out that this phrase may be taken with *Tiberii arte*, indicating that there is no specific temporal repression, but that Tiberius brings the law back, then holds off on exercising its full might until the people of Rome accept that it is legal to do so.\textsuperscript{66} In this reading Tiberius’ natural dissimulation and fury combine with a law which ties itself firmly to the importance of Augustus and his government, to create a monster ready to lay waste to Rome.

**Germanicus as a Symbol of Virtue and a Foil to Tiberius**

While the *maiestas* trials stand out as one of the clearest examples of the horror which was Tiberius’ anger, they are not the thing that Tacitus has Tiberius most often vent his anger on, that would be his adopted son, Germanicus. Tacitus gives proof of this many times over the two books in which Germanicus is alive, such as in the first book when, discussing the mutinies in Germany and the results of Germanicus attempting to put them down, he says *quod Tiberio haud probatum, seu cuncta Germanici in deterius trahenti, sive exercitum imagine caesorum insepultorumque tardatum ad proelia et formidolosiorem hostium credebat*.\textsuperscript{67} (Tiberius hardly approved, either considering all the deeds of Germanicus for the worse or he believed the image of unburied dead made an army slower to battle and less formidable against the enemy)

Holbrooke claims that the syntax of the passage favors the first supposition, which is in keeping

\textsuperscript{66} Furneaux 246
\textsuperscript{67} Tacitus *Ann.* 1.62
with Tiberius’ overall treatment of Germanicus. As was shown before, no matter what victories he wins or advances he makes, Germanicus can do nothing to please Tiberius and is the eternal focus of his anger. In the book Tacitus shows Tiberius to go so far as to take away all the honors due to Germanicus, engineering whatever reasons he needed in the moment.

Although Tacitus makes obvious Tiberius’ hatred of his son, it is not a logical hatred. What reason would Tiberius have to hate his own nephew, the son of a brother he himself had loved? Especially in a system of government so firmly predicated on family, the blood relations between Germanicus and Tiberius should have made them each other’s firmest supporters. And while this does hold true for Germanicus, it is manifestly not the case for Tiberius. It must be asked then why Tacitus put the two men at such great odds. As is often true, the answer is only rarely obvious, but can be intuited from the subtext of events.

Tacitus clearly telegraphs his intentions for Germanicus, as he does with many of his major characters, in Germanicus’ full introduction to the narrative. This introduction takes the form of a digression of Germanicus’ nature, and can be compared to the passing references given to him earlier in the text. He says that *iuveni civile ingenium, mira comitas et diversa ab Tiberii sermone vultu, adrogantibus et obscuris.* (the young man had a civilian mind and remarkable kindness, different from Tiberius’ speech and look, arrogant and hidden) The contrast between the two men is remarkably clear, clearer perhaps than should be expected from Tacitus. This makes sense, however, due to the importance Germanicus has in Tacitus’ overall ideological

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68 Holbrooke 43
69 Tacitus Ann. 1.42
70 Proof of this love can be seen in Suetonius’ Life of Tiberius where, in chapter 2, Tiberius conveys his brother’s corpse back to Rome, going before on foot the entire way from Germany as a show of devotion.
71 Another notable example of this practice, while will be discussed later, is Tacitus’ introduction of Sejanus, who is mentioned in passing often in the first three books, but is not officially introduced until the beginning of the fourth.
72 Tacitus Ann. 1.33
schema for the *Annals* as a whole. By attributing to Germanicus all of the qualities which he sees Tiberius as lacking Tacitus sets him as a foil to the emperor, a symbol of good behaviors which can still exist even under the principate.\(^74\) Then, by making Germanicus the focus of so much of Tiberius’ anger, and finally by killing him, Tacitus makes it clear that the world Augustus created is no longer a world for good men.

Turning back slightly to Germanicus’ first mention in the work, even at this point Tacitus sets him up as a foil to the evil inherent in the empire, only at that moment he is set up opposite Livia and her schemes. Right after describing Livia’s trickery that ended in the exile of Agrippa Tacitus writes *at hercule Germanicus*.\(^75\) As Furneaux points out this adversative is incredibly strong, making clear Livia’s failure in dealing with Germanicus at this point.\(^76\) Although, as has been shown, the two inhabit distinct symbolic spheres, when in relation to Germanicus Tiberius and Livia are often conflated, both symbolizing things that he is diametrically opposed to.\(^77\) The other mention of Germanicus before his “true” introduction is that Tiberius fears him, due to the large amount of support he has amongst both the people and the armies.\(^78\) A recurrent theme through the hexad, Tacitus makes a point that the people despise Tiberius and everything he stands for. By giving Germanicus the support of the people, Tacitus deepens the divide between the two men, priming his readers for everything which comes after this point.

Whereas one of Tiberius’ defining features to Tacitus is his delay and innate fear, Germanicus is often characterized as being quick to act, the very image of a republican man who

\(^74\) For further examples of Germanicus goodness, see 2.13 where Tacitus lists in *oratio obliqua* all the positive qualities attributed to Germanicus by his men.
\(^75\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.3
\(^76\) Furneaux 159. Goodyear in his note on this same passage (114) goes so far as to refer to Germanicus as a Tacitean “hero”, a characterization that I am not inclined to disagree with.
\(^77\) For such an example see Tacitus *Ann.* 3.3, where the two are joined together in avoiding the public after Germanicus’ death.
\(^78\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.7
puts the good of Rome before his own safety. Not long after being introduced as Tiberius’ foil, Tacitus says that *Germanicus quanto summae spei propior, tanto impensius pro Tiberio niti...dehinc audito legionum tumultu raptim profectus.*\(^{79}\) (Germanicus, however close to the highest hopes, as unstintingly he served Tiberius spurns hope of exaltation and serves his government...then with the tumult of the legions heard, straightaway he set out) Not only is Germanicus devoted to the government, but when he hears that something needs to get done he does so immediately, and without delay, gathering his forces and riding against the enemies of Rome, whereas Tiberius, against those same enemies, dissimulates and pretends to be leaving while in fact having no intention of doing so.

Germanicus also does not fear his own failures, whether past or present. When told that he will set out for the east, he ponders over all of his old battle plans, attempting to learn from whatever mistakes he made in the past.\(^{80}\) Compared to Tiberius, the contrast is stark. Tiberius fears failure to a point of paralysis, shifting his responsibilities and refusing to be held accountable for everything that the empire needs him to do. In one man we see someone deserving to lead, however it is not the man who sits on the throne.

It is not only in his swiftness to act that Germanicus stands apart from Tiberius, however, but also in his steadfast refusal to take part in crime. It was a well-known fact, even from the time of Augustus, that the army held the true power over the succession, but for Tacitus this was doubly clear as for him the Year of Four Emperors was recent history. Thus, when the legions offer the principate to Germanicus, it seems like an open path to power. Germanicus’ answer, however, is not what the legions expect as Tacitus tells, *tum vero, quasi scelere contaminaretur,*

\(^{79}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 1.34

\(^{80}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 2.5
praeceps tribunali desiluit.\textsuperscript{81} (but indeed, as if contaminated with a crime, headlong he leapt from the tribunal) The very mention of the crime, as if it were the crime itself, is enough to cause Germanicus to flee as quickly as possible (ie. \textit{praeceps}). Tacitus shows here a man devoted to keeping himself pure and uncorrupted by the temptations which grow throughout the principate, the very corruptions that Tiberius, through both his own actions and his collusion with Livia, has come to embody.

Germanicus proves this not only by the actions he avoids, however, but also by the ones which he takes. Tacitus gives often examples of him embodying the most well respected attributes of Roman society. Responding to a request from a rebel for mercy, Tacitus tells readers that Germanicus \textit{clementi responso liberis propinquisque eius incoluitatem, ipsi sedem vetere in provincia pollicetur}.\textsuperscript{82} (With a merciful response he promised safety from his children and his fellows, and for himself a home in an old province) By invoking \textit{clementia} by name, Tacitus gives to Germanicus one of the oldest virtues of Rome, and a virtue that is the complete opposite of everything Tiberius, with his anger and fury, has shown himself to be. Not long after this, Tacitus gives Germanicus another ancient virtue, that of \textit{pietas}, when he says \textit{igitur cupido Caesarem invadit solvendi suprema militibus ducique, permoto ad miserationem omni qui aderat exercitu ob propinquos, amicos, denique ob casus bellorum et sortem hominum}.\textsuperscript{83} (Then a desire came upon Caesar (Germanicus), to pay respect to the soldiers and the general, all in the army moved to sympathy for neighbors, friends, the ruin of war, and the lot of human kind) The importance of this respect for the dead and family cannot be overstated in Roman society, as is immortalized by Vergil in the \textit{Aeneid}. Taken together these two passages, so close to one

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\textsuperscript{81} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 1.35
\textsuperscript{82} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 1.58
\textsuperscript{83} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 1.61
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another, paint Germanicus as a man of the highest moral caliber and possessing of the virtues once beloved in the Republic. Instead of being beloved, however, Germanicus is despised by Tiberius for these very qualities, a strong censure of the government in general as it hates anything better than itself, even those things which it should most welcome.

The reign of a tyrant is no time for good men, however, and even Germanicus cannot escape the corruption which begins to infect all of Rome. In the second book Tacitus begins to show Germanicus falling into the temptations and pitfalls which have long since consumed most of the Roman elite. Eventually Germanicus begins to invoke the names of his ancestors like Tiberius does in order to lend credibility to his orders, tying himself with the familial system which now dominates the Roman political landscape.\textsuperscript{84} The more damaging blow, however, comes when Tacitus relates Germanicus’ trip to Egypt, saying \textit{Germanicus Aegyptum proficiscitur cognoscendae antiquitatis. sed cura provinciae praetendebatur}.\textsuperscript{85} (Germanicus went to Egypt to learn of antiquity, but he pretended a care of the province) Germanicus, the embodiment of justness and righteousness in the empire, has fallen to dissimulation. Goodyear provides an extensive commentary on this passage which reinforces Tacitus’ claims of dissimulation.\textsuperscript{86} The picture painted here of Germanicus is not a good one, and wildly different from the man who willingly leapt from the tribunal to avoid being connected to crime. He has entered Egypt for no reason other than his own interest, contrary to the laws Augustus set down. In doing so he has left his eastern position under the control of Piso, a man who has shown himself to be unreliable and untrustworthy. Germanicus’ once shining star has begun to sink under the mounting influences of vice surrounding him, and soon enough it falls.

\textsuperscript{84} For an example Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 2.14
\textsuperscript{85} Tacitus \textit{Ann.} 2.59
\textsuperscript{86} Goodyear 372-375
Tacitus foreshadows Germanicus’ death even before he shows the flaws which has taken root in him. In one long passage he recalls to his readers all of Rome’s other honorable sweethearts, like Marcellus, who died before they could reach the apex of their glory.\(^{87}\) This pattern is one that will be repeated soon, to the detriment of Rome. Germanicus takes ill, an illness which he, and through him the readers, believe comes from Piso,\(^{88}\) and to Piso from Tiberius, who has long had his sights set on removing his rival. Tacitus never explicitly blames Tiberius for the poisoning, but weaves a complex web of rhetoric and interdependent suppositions that leave even the most careful of readers no choice but to at least countenance the possibility. As was mentioned earlier, Livia also becomes a part of this web, bringing her own forms of corruption to the mix and joining together with Tiberius into a single entity focused on the destruction of its opposite. Tacitus uses this to his benefit by making it clear that Piso’s wife, the one who is supposedly actually responsible for the murder, was protected by Livia and thus able to escape conviction. Piso, who attempts to throw himself on the two’s mercy, finds himself transformed into a scapegoat and his only escape is that of suicide. And so, together, Livia and Tiberius rid themselves of Germanicus and cover their tracks, in a complex narrative web that reveals clearly the danger of being a good man in a system inclined towards wickedness.

The Shift in Tiberius’ Personality

So far in this paper many things have been mentioned as occurring in the first half of the hexad. This is because, following the conclusion of Piso’s trial in the third book, and with it the

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\(^{87}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 2.41

\(^{88}\) For Germanicus belief in his poisoning see Tacitus *Ann.* 2.69. Goodyear’s commentary that Tacitus does not seem to believe this thought does no hold up under the weight of later references to Germanicus as having been poisoned, and Tacitus clear desire to see blame thrown on Tiberius.
greater part of the narrative of Germanicus, there is an abrupt turn in the overall work. Tacitus foreshadows this turn in the very first sentence of the fourth book when he calls Germanicus’ death “favorable” to Tiberius. From this point on Tiberius is unrelenting in keeping even the thought of his foil contained, exercising his anger at anyone, however remotely, connected to Germanicus. Not a sentence after this Tacitus makes the turn completely clear *cum repente turbare fortuna coepit, saevire ipse aut saevientibus viris praebere.* (When suddenly fortune began to riot, and he (Tiberius) to be savage or to empower savage men) Commentators have abounded with notes on this passage and with dramatic descriptions of its implications. Woodman and Martin claim that, with the removal of his internal fear, Tiberius is about to take on the characteristics of a “perverse and powerful deity.” Holbrooke likewise likens the coming transformation to that of a threatening storm about to break. Both images contain the same ideas of raw, unrestrained power and destruction breaking free across the land, and this is no doubt intentional. At this point Tacitus begins to collapse the distinction between danger and destruction, making the very moment of fear tantamount to a death sentence. As he often does, Tacitus connects the blame for much of this fear to the *maiestas* trials, which Tiberius gives full rein to at this point, having, as was mentioned above, repressed them earlier. In addition to this, however, he places blame on the one remaining important character in the hexad, a character who has appeared several times before this point but was never truly introduced until he is given a several chapter long introduction at the start of book four: Tiberius’ minister, Sejanus.

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89 In 4.17 Tiberius vents his anger on Germanicus’ children, even though at this point they pose little threat to him and in 4.18 the very friendship of Germanicus is fatal to two men. Woodman notes that this sort of perversion of the *amicitia* system is normally a signifier of civil unrest.
90 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.1
91 Woodman and Martin 79
92 Holbrooke 154
93 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.28
94 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.6
Sejanus is known throughout the historians as a man whose rise and fall visited destruction equally to the Roman people. From his position at Tiberius’ side he was like Catiline, casting his eyes about and marking out those who opposed him for death. When he fell, he was a comet striking the earth, consuming all around him in destruction. To Tacitus he is this, but he is also so much more. As Tiberius takes the mantle of vice and corruption from Livia, Sejanus steps in to fill another role, that of the breakdown of social order. An equestrian by birth, Sejanus claws his way up the social ladder, uncaring towards whoever he needs to push down to reach the next wrung. His influence is nearly omnipresent, pushing men to disregard social constructs once held dear and instead embrace a twisted version of the once great Republican hierarchy.

As mentioned before, Sejanus’ introduction into the work is, like the other characters discussed in this paper, a place where Tacitus outlines his purpose in introducing him into the narrative. In commenting on the section, Woodman and Martin note that its placement at the very beginning of the chapter, and the overall rhetorical style of it, indicates that this passage marks the beginning of a new section of the work overall. Much of the passage takes the form of a long list of qualities, both physical and mental. Furneaux comments that many of these characteristics are those that were once attributed to Catiline, a comparison which is certainly not accidental. Where Catiline embodied one of the greatest dangers to the Republic, Sejanus symbolizes one of the greatest dangers inherent in the Empire. Furthermore, several of the qualities attributed to Sejanus are ones which would normally carry positive connotations, such

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95 Woodman and Martin 1989 84
96 Furneaux 448
as *industria* and *vigilantia*, but their connection with Sejanus has corrupted them and made them noxious, much as the empire corrupted Germanicus and will go on to corrupt many more good and honorable men.

As the work continues Sejanus becomes more like Tiberius as he climbs his way to the top, gaining political power in equal measure to his corruption. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the epitaph which Tiberius himself applies to Sejanus *socius laborum*. Sejanus is now the ally of all Tiberius’ labors, a position Tiberius himself once seemed to fill in regards to Livia. In addition to being an ally of labor, Tacitus seems determined that his readers view Sejanus also as an ally in vice. Sejanus begins to effect dissimulation in order to achieve his goals, learning and employing the arts of the empire, such as when he attempts to convince Livilla to murder her husband Drusus, when Tacitus tells *hanc ut amore incensus adulterio pellexit*.97 (as if burning with love, he sought adultery with her)

Notably, during the conclusion of the account of Drusus’ death, Tacitus makes another statement which firmly ties Tiberius and Sejanus together, writing *sed quia Seianus facinorum omnium repertor habebatur, ex nimia caritate in eum Caesaris et ceterorum in utrumque odio quamvis fabulosa et immania credebantur*.98 (But because Sejanus was held as the creator of every crime, from Caesar’s excessive care of him and the hatred of them both in all others, things no matter how absurd and mad were believed) As Woodman and Martin point out, and as has been mentioned in this paper before, *repertor* is a term which was applied to Tiberius earlier in the work.99 The two men are described similarly throughout the book, a striking fact considering the divide which separates the two socially. Tiberius was a senator, born from an important

97 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.3
98 Tacitus *Ann.* 4.11
99 Woodman and Martin 1989 127
family, and the step-son of Augustus even before his adoption. Sejanus is an equestrian of no
ture distinction before his connection with Tiberius, and even then purely in terms of position he
is nothing more than the captain of the Praetorian Guard. And yet, somehow, this man whose
social standing should be fairly set in place by all the customs of the Republic, uproots himself
and displaces men of far clearer distinction, senator and equestrian alike, as he reaches for more
power, eyes set on eventually gaining the principate itself. In creating a character like this, and
conflating him with Tiberius, and then showing the terrible havoc he is able to wreak throughout
the empire, Tacitus demonstrates one of the most destructive aspects of Augustus’ system: its
pensant to do away with long held social customs or, more often, to pervert them and twist
them to better fit the will of the princeps.

The *Vulgus* as an Exemplum of Roman Thought

While Tiberius stands as the centerpiece of the hexad, and it is through him that readers
are able to easily discern the most dangerous and damaging aspects of the principate, there is
another character who bears mention and who is related to Tiberius in more tangential ways than
the others referenced earlier. This character is the vulgar, comprised of many individual people,
but a character in itself to Tacitus, and one whose symbolic importance is much easier to
overlook. The vulgar represents, and very often simply is, the people of Rome as a whole, and it
is through it that Tacitus shows the calamitous results of the failings described through the other
characters in the work.

Tacitus’ most telling observation about the vulgar lies in their need for a strong leader to
show them the proper path, a need which is not, at this moment, being met, and which is creating
chaos amongst the people. When Germanicus is assaulted by the rebellious legions he rebukes
them harshly and begins to divide legion from legion in order to return to some semblance of order. It would have been easy, at this moment, for the soldiers, who are called a vulgus several times in this passage, to overwhelm the general, but Tacitus claims an amor obsequie (obsequious love) held them back.¹⁰⁰ This amor holds the men only once they see that Germanicus can be the strong leader that they have been lacking, and they willingly give themselves over to him at this point. It is a notable contrast that these are the same rebellious soldiers which Tiberius delayed for months to travel to, demonstrating to them that he was not a strong leader and revoking any claim he might have had to their love of obedience.

A further proof of the vulgus’ need for a leader, and their willingness to look for one anywhere can be seen in Tacitus’ account of the events that surrounded Piso. After being their commander for a short time and ingratiating himself amongst them, the soldiers eventually began calling Piso the parens legionum.¹⁰¹ (parent of the legions) Goodyear notes that this appellation was not one the vulgus had the power to give, nor one which should have been applied to a simple general.¹⁰² Such honorifics were largely restricted to emperors at this point, and the wisest among them were careful about which ones they used. By giving Piso this title the vulgus puts him, at least in this one way, on a level with Tiberius, showing that they do not believe Tiberius to be enough of a leader for them and must search for an additional leader elsewhere. Their choice of leader also shows Tacitus disdain for the vulgus and his implicit belief that they cannot be trusted to lead themselves, as Piso is shown throughout the narrative to be a completely repulsive man whose lack of leadership potential is second only to his lack of courage in the face of death. In this way Tacitus demonstrates that the principate has taken away the usual power

¹⁰⁰ Tacitus Ann. 1.28
¹⁰¹ Tacitus Ann. 2.55
¹⁰² Goodyear 363
structures which the people could depend on, without giving anything back in the way of actually trustworthy leaders.

As can be noticed from above, the vulgus often refers to the soldiers in addition to the actual citizenry of Rome. While these may seem like two very distinct groups, Tacitus goes out of his way to blur the lines between them, allowing whatever thoughts occur in one group to be transposed onto the other. Germanicus’ thoughts, while he is attempting to learn what his soldiers think of him, go a long way towards affecting this conflation. In the passage in question he relates the difficulty in trusting any kind of subordinate, since each, when questioned, will produce answers fitting to their position and nowhere near the truth. Many of these same problems exist within the citizenry, it is only the titles of the positions which need to be changed in order to make them exactly the same. There is little difference, after all, between a general asking his lieutenant a question and an emperor asking his minister. Both men seek to please their commanding officers in the same way.

Tacitus’ other most common comment on the vulgus relates to their lack of moderation. It is his usual refrain when talking about the crowd that they have no sense of limit and will take everything to the extreme if left unchecked, which they often are in a society lacking true leadership. To pick only one example, the conduct of Germanicus’ soldiers when caught in a storm at sea reveals the danger of this kind of excess, *milesque pavidus et casuum maris ignarus dum turbat nautas vel intempestive iuvat, officia prudentium corrumpbat.* (Soldiers, fearful and unknowing of the matters of the sea, then disrupted the sailors and offered ill-timed aid, corrupting the work of the knowledgeable) Driven on by their fear and lack of limit the soldiers throw the ship into chaos, making the jobs of the sailors all the more difficult and eventually

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103 Tacitus Ann. 2.12
104 Tacitus Ann. 2.23
leading to the entire army being driven ashore. Time and again Tacitus shows his *vulgus* in situations like this, unchecked and driven by rampant emotion, leading to chaos and destruction. Once, such situations would have been checked by the strong hand of the senate or the consuls, but now such work falls to Tiberius, a man who reveals often how stunningly *unfit* for such responsibility he is.\(^\text{105}\)

Tacitus attempts to make the *vulgus* slightly better by demonstrating their aversion for the corruption around them and their preference for honor and ideals. At one point he goes so far as to say that *Germanico alienatio patrui amorem apud ceteros auxerat*.\(^\text{106}\) (for Germanicus, the hatred of his uncle increased his love in others) As Germanicus stands for honor and Tiberius for the vice-filled principate, the people are shown to prefer the first, while they suffer from the second. And yet, even this is not enough to save them, for Tacitus shows them to also be easily taken in by the artifice of dissimulation. When the news of Germanicus death finally gets back to Rome the people are destroyed, but then they hear that he is actually still alive. Even though the two stories conflict completely the people rejoice, willing to believe anything that makes them feel better even if it is unlikely. And in this way they are the perfect target for Tiberius and the system he represents, easily fooled and led around by the nose to do exactly what their emperor wants them to.

**Conclusion**

\(^\text{105}\) For more examples of the *vulgus* lack of moderation see 1.29, 1.46, 2.82, and 3.14.  
\(^\text{106}\) Tacitus *Ann.* 2.43
Looking over the cast of characters described it is clear that Tacitus knew what he was doing when wrote the *Annals*. With a careful command of rhetoric and literary technique he crafted characters whose actions and choices reflected deeper problems in the government, whether directly in the form of Tiberius, the stand-in for the government as a whole, or indirectly such as the character of Livia who, for three books, represents the background corruption and vice that slowly infects the empire. In doing so he also addresses Tiberius’ mishandling of the army, which prefers Germanicus in every way, censures Augustus’ foreign expansion policy, and focuses his attention on the inherent problems of the succession, all three major issues which can be traced back to Augustus. Tacitus’ goal, through all of this, is to censure Augustus in the only way he can, by revealing the terrible set of manacles he put on the Roman people when he created the principate. By making his *vulgus* weak-willed and excessive Tacitus distances them from the idea of a proud civilization which the Romans saw themselves as, and laid the blame of it all directly at the feet of the deified first princeps himself, without ever speaking an ill word about him.

Bibliography


