

Uncovering Tacitus in the speeches of others

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One of the most interesting facets of Tacitus' writing is how he portrays women, especially powerful women in his speeches. In his writing, he draws heavily on archetypal notions to describe women, saying for example that "then, there were feminine jealousies, Livia feeling a stepmother's bitterness towards Agrippina, and Agrippina herself too being rather excitable, only her purity and love of her husband gave a right direction to her otherwise imperious disposition" (I.33). Beneath the ancient archetypes of evil stepmother and impious seductress, Tacitus seems confounded with a unique moral problem in the women he writes of. But what frightens him is surely more than old prejudices alone; for combined with the power of the emperor, the evil of women conspires to destroy Rome. Speaking in the voice of the people, mumbling after the death of Augustus, Tacitus writes "There was his mother too with a womanly caprice. They must, it seemed, be subject to a female and to two striplings besides, who for a while would burden, and some day rend asunder the State" (I.4). And yet, the same evil coupled with the lesser power of a magistrate unleashes similar destruction, albeit on a lesser scale. Writing on behalf of Caecina addressing the senate, Tacitus claims "Formerly they were restrained by the Oppian and other laws; now, loosed from every bond, they rule our houses, our tribunals, even our armies" (III.34).

Apprehension of the power held by imperial women perhaps reflects his ambivalence about the role of women in Roman society in general. Caecina continues, "whenever men are accused of extortion, most of the charges are directed against the wives. It is to these that the vilest of the provincials instantly attach themselves; it is they who undertake and settle business; two persons receive homage when they appear; there are two centres of government, and the women's orders are the more despotic and intemperate" (III.34). Ironically though,

when Tacitus speaks under the guise of Marcus Lepidus defending Lutorius before the senate, he claims the exact opposite, saying that “nothing serious or alarming is to be apprehended from the man who works on the imaginations not of men but of silly women” (III.50). On the one hand, Tacitus appreciates the fact that women are obviously essential to the functioning of society, but on the other hand, he cannot help but see their hands in all manner of treachery. But this should not surprise us; after all, given that Tacitus sees treachery anywhere and everywhere he looks, and given that women comprise one half of the population, we should wonder if women were not counted among the swelling ranks of Tacitus’ evildoers. And yet, with his gaze turned to such horrors, he seems stricken by the memory that Roman men hardly behaved any better. Indeed, speaking under the guise of Valerius challenging Caecina’s motion to ban magistrates from bringing their wives with them to the provinces, Tacitus writes “But some wives have abandoned themselves to scheming and rapacity. Well; even among our magistrates, are not many subject to various passions? Still, that is not a reason for sending no one into a province. Husbands have often been corrupted by the vices of their wives. Are then all unmarried men blameless?” (III.34).

Another fascinating feature of Tacitus’ writing is how he portrays the rebelling soldiers in Pannonia. Torn between a wonderful opportunity to mock Tiberius and his despair of popular agitation and instability, Tacitus elects a middle course deciding to do both. Recall the speech he places in Percennius’ mouth, where Tacitus writes “we have blundered enough by our tameness for so many years, in having to endure thirty or forty campaigns till we grow old, most of us with bodies maimed by wounds. Even dismissal is not the end of our service, but, quartered under a legion’s standard we toil through the same hardships under another

title. If a soldier survives so many risks, he is still dragged into remote regions where, under the name of lands, he receives soaking swamps or mountainous wastes. Assuredly, military service itself is burdensome and unprofitable; ten as a day is the value set on life and limb; out of this, clothing, arms, tents, as well as the mercy of centurions and exemptions from duty have to be purchased. But indeed of floggings and wounds, of hard winters, wearisome summers, of terrible war, or barren peace, there is no end” (I.17).

Here Tacitus makes an excellent case for the suffering of the common soldiers, and, indirectly, the failure of lame emperors to alleviate it. The hidden jab at imperial power is made more apparent as Percennius continues, saying “do the praetorian cohorts, which have just got their two denarii per man, and which after sixteen years are restored to their homes, encounter more perils? We do not disparage the guards of the capital; still, here amid barbarous tribes we have to face the enemy from our tents” (I.17). The comparison is clear: surely those who defend the state deserve the same treatment as those who defend the emperor. More than that though, Tacitus uses the Praetorian guard as a stand in for the emperor himself. He implies that the emperor risks neither life nor limb but lives amidst unimaginable splendor while the legions upon whose back the empire was built are reduced to squalor in the name of a service which only death can end.

Indirect imperial humiliation at the hands of soldiers does not end there however. While Drusus tried to parlay the question of the rebelling legion’s demands upon the senate, Tacitus whispers into the ear of an unnamed soldier who demands to know of Drusus “why had he come, neither to increase the soldiers’ pay, nor to alleviate their hardships, in a word, with no power to better their lot? Yet heaven knew that all were allowed to scourge and to execute.

Tiberius used formerly in the name of Augustus to frustrate the wishes of the legions, and the same tricks were now revived by Drusus. Was it only sons who were to visit them? Certainly, it was a new thing for the emperor to refer to the Senate merely what concerned the soldier's interests. Was then the same Senate to be consulted whenever notice was given of an execution or of a battle? Were their rewards to be at the discretion of absolute rulers, their punishments to be without appeal?" (I.26). In one fell swoop, Tacitus manages to condemn Drusus actions as being the most recent stage in a long chain of Tiberius' brutality to the legions while at the same time striking at the very heart of the imperium by challenging the notion that the emperor must come first in privilege, but not quite first in responsibility.

Indeed, the imperial throne carrying with it a power that comes without responsibility must have galled Tacitus' exquisite moral sensibilities. We can see hints of this where Tacitus writes of the ascendancy of the imperium, noting that "thus the State had been revolutionised, and there was not a vestige left of the old sound morality" (I.4). Moreover, we can see Tacitus' moral condemnation of Tiberius for his unwillingness to take responsibility. For example, in describing the execution of Sempronius Gracchus, Julia's paramour, Tacitus writes of the executioners: "these soldiers were not sent from Rome, but by Lucius Asprenas, proconsul of Africa, on the authority of Tiberius, who had vainly hoped that the infamy of the murder might be shifted on Asprenas" (I.59). According to Tacitus, Tiberius' unwillingness to accept responsibility extended into the legal arena as well. He describes how, unable to question a slave while investigating his master, "Tiberius, with his cleverness in devising new law, ordered Libo's slaves to be sold singly to the State-agent, so that, forsooth, without an infringement of the Senate's decree, Libo might be tried on their evidence" (II.30).

Indeed, under the guise of the common people, Tacitus rebukes Tiberius for failing to take responsibility in resolving the crisis of rebelling legions. Tacitus writes: “He ought to have gone himself and confronted with his imperial majesty those who would have soon yielded, when they once saw a sovereign of long experience, who was the supreme dispenser of rigour or of bounty. Could Augustus, with the feebleness of age on him, so often visit Germany, and is Tiberius, in the vigour of life, to sit in the Senate and criticise its members’ words? He had taken good care that there should be slavery at Rome; he should now apply some soothing medicine to the spirit of soldiers, that they might be willing to endure peace” (I.46). A further example is how Tacitus describes Tiberius’ reaction to the slaughter of Agrippa. He claims that Tiberius and Livia ordered the execution, but that “when the centurion reported, according to military custom, that he had executed the command, Tiberius replied that he had not given the command, and that the act must be justified to the Senate” (I.6).

While Tacitus gleefully describes the Tiberius’ failings and the suffering of the legions, their dereliction of duty and threat to the state no doubt proved odious in his sight. Thus, after milking the revolutionaries for every condemnation of Tiberius and the imperial system that he could, Tacitus turns his rage upon the mutinous legions. Writing under the guise of the commander Blaesus, Tacitus makes a patriotic appeal to the mutineers saying “It is not through mutiny and tumult that the desires of the army ought to be communicated to Caesar, nor did our soldiers of old ever ask so novel a boon of ancient commanders, nor have you yourselves asked it of the Divine Augustus. It is far from opportune that the emperor’s cares, now in their first beginning, should be aggravated. If, however, you are bent upon attempting in peace what even after your victory in the civil wars you did not demand,

why, contrary to the habit of obedience, contrary to the law of discipline, do you meditate violence? Decide on sending envoys, and give them instructions in your presence” (I.19). Amusingly, Tacitus delivers this wonderful speech with only the smallest compliments to his own ego, describing how Blaesus spoke the words Tacitus gave him “with the consummate tact of an orator” (I.19). Even more amusing, wrapped beneath many layers of irony, are the crocodile tears Tacitus sheds in this passage over the suffering of Tiberius during his time of mourning. No doubt Tiberius shed many a crocodile tear lamenting Augustus’ death.

Beyond our amusement, this speech serves as the repository of Tacitus’ rage. Where before he hailed the legitimacy of the legionares’ complaints, here he denigrates them as gross opportunists, unwilling to dare ask their excesses from Augustus since he had the power to refuse. Seeing everywhere around him the stench of a vast unyielding moral decay, Tacitus lambasts the legionares for demanding what their predecessors would never have dared to ask. Worst of all, he impunes their characters by comparing them, and comparing them unfavorably at that, with those who nearly destroyed the empire waging civil wars. For Tacitus, even the unparalleled greed of those willing to destroy Roman society in order to get a bigger piece of it pales in comparison to these legionares. His final plea for envoys and mediation rather than violence and revolution harken back to a long dead republican age. In his quiet indignation, laced with bitterness, Tacitus reminds us not only of the republic’s death, but of its murderer, for the unstated question in his final appeal is to whom should the soldiers send their representatives. The answer, of course, is Tiberius.