

Creating Conspiracy in Tacitus' *Annales*

Book 15 of Tacitus' *Annales* contains two of its most memorable conspiracies. In the first, Nero and his accomplice Tigellinus are implied to have started Rome's great fire. The second, the Pisonian conspiracy, is an alliance against Nero himself, culminating in a failed assassination. Conspiracies are fruitful soil for the sort of narrative ambiguity Tacitus regularly exploits in the *Annales*. They have murky facts, further muddied by the difficulty inherent to writing imperial history, and are themselves events of uncertain origin. This allows the historian to twist the valence of each narrative in one direction or the other, accusing or implying as necessary to demonstrate the validity of his own historiography. Combined with Tacitus's compelling character portraits and deft linguistic hand, Book 15 becomes a masterclass in theorizing historical conspiracy.

In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White suggests that the desirability of narrative arises from its ability to transmit messages about a shared reality (1). For historians, this requires a history which is more than a chronological series of events and in which those events are "revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence (5)." The creation of narrative from a series of historical events requires a series of choices which are more appropriate to the novelist than the historian. Main players (or characters) must be chosen, a satisfying narrative arc must be constructed, and the representation of the past must be both engaging and meaningful. The historian's attempts to portray the reality of the past are always tied to the problem of portrayal as inherently subjective.

Tacitus and his contemporaries prioritize the value of the stories they tell about the past over their truthfulness since the function of classical historiography is a moral one. In particular,

Tacitus aims to “[write] works which are useful..he endeavours to set examples and to recommend attitudes which are meaningful to his contemporaries and which they can accept” (Classen 116). Even as it develops and matures, the historian’s writing style seems to have been influenced by the rhetorical models which were in fashion during his education and in which “standards of historical truth and of consistent objectivity tended to yield to considerations of effective persuasion, of advocacy, and of dramatic form.” (Sullivan 312) This results in accounts which are artfully written and entertaining to read, but which are deliberately ambiguous about the truth or falsity of historical particulars.

Such ambiguity, exemplified in Tacitus’ accounts of conspiracy, is created by a variety of specific rhetorical devices and themes, including regular inclusion of rumors, the use of unknown authors as sources, innuendo or implication, and the “weighted alternative.” Such rhetorical devices are key to the impressions and implications which form the most compelling parts of Tacitus’ various histories. In particular, Inez Scott Ryberg suggests that “they [the rhetorical devices] are the resources employed by Tacitus the artist to produce an impression for which Tacitus the historian is not willing to take the responsibility” (384). This implied dichotomy between the artistic choices (which create an impression) and the real work of the historian is the same which White confronts in his work on the “embarrassment of plot.” For Tacitus, however, the use of these rhetorical devices, the creation of impressions, and the combination of artist and historian are in no way contradictions.

Tacitus’ work emphasizes the particular version of historical accuracy which allows him to demonstrate his prowess as a historian, but the writer is concerned with essential truths not factual ones. These two conspiracies, then, emerge as a space which is at once anxiety-inducing and exciting since they provide space for creation of narrative, manipulation of perspective,

character, etc. This space, however, is also an issue for the intensely self-reflective historian as he demonstrates over and over again the ways in which history can be manipulated and rewritten, even when starting from the same bare facts.

Works Cited

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