

**The *Princeps* and the *Pauper*: Tacitus and the Shame of Aristocratic Welfare**  
**Mik Larsen**  
**California State University, Long Beach**  
**mlarsen@ucla.edu**

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*All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.*

1. DEFINITIONS:

A: Aristocratic Welfare: Financial assistance provided to aristocrats by the emperor, for the purpose of maintaining them in the senatorial or equestrian classes

B: Elite Poor: Category of Roman aristocrats whose ability to maintain the census qualifications for their *ordo* (1,000,000 sesterces for the Senate, 400,000 for the *equites*) was in doubt

2: Foundations of aristocratic welfare

Cassius Dio 55.13.6-7

ἐπειδὴ τε συχνοὶ τῶν νεανίσκων ἔκ τε τοῦ βουλευτικοῦ γένους καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἱππέων ἐπένοντο μηδὲν ἐπαίτιον ἔχοντες, τοῖς μὲν πλείοσι τὸ τεταγμένον τίμημα ἀνεπλήρωσεν, ὀγδοήκοντα δὲ τισι καὶ ἐς τριάκοντα αὐτὸ μυριάδας ἐπηύξησε.

Considering that many of the young men from the senatorial class, and of the equestrians, were poor through no fault of their own, to many of them he [Augustus] supplied the necessary amount, and for eighty of them augmented it to 300,000 drachmas [=120,000 sesterces]

Tacitus *Annals* 13.34

*sed nobili familiae honor auctus est oblati in singulos annos quingenis sestertiis quibus Messala paupertatem innoxiam sustentaret.*

But the honor was added to the noble house in that each year Nero offered 500,000 sesterces through which Messala could sustain his harmless poverty.

Suetonius *Vespasian* 17

*In omne hominum genus liberalissimus expleuit censum senatorium, consulares inopes quingenis sestertiis annuis sustentavit*

He was exceedingly generous to all people, filling out the census for senators, and sustaining needy consulars with 500,000 sesterces annually

3: The Case of Marcus Hortensius

A: Tiberius' Speech (*Annals* 2.38)

*'si quantum pauperum est venire huc et liberis suis petere pecunias coeperint, singuli numquam exsatiabuntur, res publica deficiet. nec sane ideo a maioribus concessum est ... ut privata negotia et res familiaris nostras hic augeamus, cum invidia senatus et principum, sive indulserint largitionem sive abnuerint. non enim preces sunt istud, sed efflagitatio, intempestiva quidem et improvisa, cum aliis de rebus convenerint*

*patres, consurgere et numero atque aetate liberum suorum urgere modestiam senatus, eandem vim in me transmittere ac velut perfringere aerarium, quod si ambitione exhauserimus, per scelera supplendum erit. dedit tibi, Hortale, divus Augustus pecuniam, sed non compellatus nec ea lege ut semper daretur. languescet alioqui industria, intendetur **socordia**, si nullus ex se metus aut spes, et securi omnes aliena subsidia expectabunt, sibi **ignavi**, nobis graves.'*

Senators, if every *pauper* should come here and start seeking money for their children, their numbers would never end, and the state would be bankrupt. Nor was it conceded by our ancestors [to introduce a motion] so that we augment our private business and family fortunes, since that would lead to hatred of both senate and emperor – whether we indulge in such charity or deny it! It's not even the request, but the audacity, unseasonable and unpredicted, when the senators are coming together on other business, for one man to stand up and force the number and the youth of his children onto the pity of the Senate – and then to turn the same power upon me as if to crack open the treasury, which, if we exhaust it to reward ambition, must be rebuilt through criminality. Divine Augustus gave you money, Hortalus, but without compulsion, and there's no law that money be given always. Otherwise industry will grow languid, idleness will spread, if we can neither fear for nor hope in ourselves, and all will grow confident of a bailout, useless to themselves, a burden upon us.

B: Complicating Details

Tiberius' Attitude (2.37, 2.38)

***quo magis mirum fuit** quod preces Marci Hortali, nobilis iuvenis, in paupertate manifesta superbius accepisset.*

Surprisingly, he listened disdainfully to the pleas of Marcus Hortensius, a noble young man in conspicuous poverty.

*Inclinatio senatus incitamentum Tiberio fuit quo promptius adversaretur*

The Senate's favorable attitude caused Tiberius to respond all the more quickly in opposition...

C: A Rough Reception (2.38)

*haec atque talia, quamquam cum adsensu audita ab iis quibus omnia principum, honesta atque inhonesta, laudare mos est, plures per silentium aut occultum murmur excepere. sensitque Tiberius; et cum paulum reticuisset, Hortalo se respondisse ait: ceterum si patribus videretur, daturum liberis eius ducena sestertia singulis, qui sexus virilis essent. egere alii grates: siluit Hortalus, pavore an avitae nobilitatis etiam inter angustias fortunae retinens. neque miseratus est posthac Tiberius, quamvis domus Hortensii **pudendam ad inopiam delaberetur.***

These and other words of this sort, however listened to favorably by those who customarily praise all imperial words, both worthwhile and not, were received

by the majority with silence or a quiet murmur. Tiberius noticed and was silent a moment, and said he had made his response to Hortalus – but if the Senate thought it should be done, 200,000 sesterces would be given to each of Hortalus' male children. Others thanked him; Hortalus was silent, whether from fear or because he retained his ancestral dignity even in the grip of misfortune. Nor did Tiberius show pity thereafter when the Hortensii fell into shameful poverty.

D: Who Deserves Charity? (2.37, 2.37)  
*Censusque quorundam senatorum iuvit.*

Tiberius aided some of the senators with their census.

*nam ego, qui non pecuniam, non studia populi neque eloquentiam, gentile domus nostrae bonum, varietate temporum accipere vel parare potuissem, satis habebam, si tenues res meae nec mihi pudori nec cuiquam oneri forent.*

Hortensius: For I have not been able to acquire enough money, nor the acclamation of the people, nor the eloquence which has been a hereditary boon to my family; I had enough if my slender means bore me neither shame nor burden.

#### 4. Is Tiberius Charitable?

A: *Annals* 2.47 (Tiberius remits taxes for five years, promises 10,000,000 sesterces to 12 cities of Asia affected by an earthquake)

B: Moral Criteria: 2.48

*Magnificam in publicum largitionem auxit Caesar haud minus grata liberalitate... ceterum ut honestam innocentium paupertatem levavit, ita prodigos et ob flagitia egentis, Vibidium Varronem, Marium Nepotem, Appium Appianum, Cornelium Sullam, Q. Vitellium movit senatu aut sponte cedere passus est.*

Caesar added to his magnificent public beneficence an equally ingratiating generosity...he lightened the blameless poverty of innocent men, yet expelled from the Senate, or allowed to abdicate, the wasteful - and those impoverished through disgraceful activity.

#### 5: The Case of Propertius Celer (*Annals* 1.75)

*Propertio Celeri praetorio, veniam ordinis ob paupertatem petenti, decies sestertium largitus est, satis conperto paternas ei angustias esse. temptantis eadem alios probare causam senatui iussit, cupidine severitatis in iis etiam quae rite faceret acerbus. unde ceteri silentium et paupertatem confessioni et beneficio praeposuerunt.*

To the praetorian Propertius Celer, seeking to exit the Senate because of poverty, Tiberius awarded 1,000,000 sesterces, satisfied that his financial straits were inherited. But he decreed that anyone else wishing the same should try their case before the Senate, since his love of severity made him harsh even when he was justified. Thus men preferred silence and poverty to confession and reward.

6. Shame and Poverty: A Claudian Example (*Annals* 12.52)

*Laudati dehinc oratione principis qui ob angustias familiaris ordine senatorio sponte cederent, motique qui remanendo **impudentiam paupertati** adicerent.*

Claudius in a speech commended those who retired from the Senate willingly due to family financial difficulties, and removed those who, by remaining, added shamefulness to their poverty.

7. Suetonius on Tiberian stinginess (*Tiberius* 47)

*paucorum senatorum inopia sustentata, ne pluribus opem ferret, negavit se aliis subuenturum, nisi senatui iustas necessitatum causas probassent. quo pacto plerosque **modestia et pudore** deterruit, in quibus Hortalum, Quinti Hortensi oratoris nepotem, qui permodica re familiari auctore Augusto quattuor liberos tulerat.*

He assisted with the poverty of a few senators, but lest more receive the same, he declared he would support no others, except when the Senate approved just causes for such necessity. Through this he deterred many through their modesty and shame, among them Hortalus, grandson of the orator, who had borne four children in very modest means through Augustus' urging.

8. The Worst of It (*Annals* 14.14)

*ceterum evulgatus **pudor** non satietatem, ut rebantur, sed incitamentum attulit. ratusque dedecus molliri, si pluris foedasset, nobilium familiarum posteros **egestate** venalis in scaenam deduxit... notos quoque equites Romanos operas arenae promittere subegit donis ingentibus*

Meanwhile the revelation of Nero's shame served not as its end, as people thought might happen, but as an incentive. Thinking that his shame would be softened if more were stained by it, he brought the sons of noble families, venal because of their poverty, onstage...He pressured some well-known *equites* to work in the arena through immense gifts.

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