

Tacitus' Evil Geniuses: Imperial Advisors in the *Annales*

The vision of the “evil genius” is a familiar one in our society. From numerous representations in film, literature and political satire, we have come to recognize the shadowy figure of the malevolent puppet-master. Such a character, however, is not absent from the histories of ancient Rome. This paper investigates the striking similarities in the characterization of Aelius Sejanus and Ofonius Tigellinus in Tacitus’ *Annales*. While there has been quite a bit of scholarly work done on characterization in the *Annales*, I shall expand on this research by focusing on these two figures, who do much to shape the legacies of their respective administrations. Sejanus and Tigellinus, two of the greatest villains in Julio-Claudian history, exhibit several notable parallels: both are in high positions of power in the empire, acting as close advisors to the emperor; both earn the distrust and disdain of the populace; and it is due (at least in part) to associations with these men that both Tiberius and Nero suffer.

Stephen Daitz and Inez Scott Ryberg offer excellent discussions of the role of characterization in the history of the early empire. As Daitz explains, “Tacitus felt compelled to explain events in terms of personal forces, i.e. the traits of human personality. Since so many of the events were of a grim and unpleasant nature, it followed that the characters of those causing these events were bound to be equally grim and unpleasant” (Daitz - 1960). Often the most compelling portrayals are those of villains, whereas “the virtuous are pale by comparison” (Daitz – 1960). It is from such scholarship that I wish to build upon our historiographical knowledge of the reigns of Tiberius and Nero. Whereas Daitz and Ryberg give much more room to the characterization of the emperors themselves, my research will shift the focus to these two men at the emperors’ sides. I wish to draw special attention to how they are introduced and described, how they rise to power, and the implications of their presence, while exploring the literary techniques that Daitz and Ryberg examine in their studies. The language Tacitus employs is calculated, used to elicit certain responses from the reader and to direct sympathies elsewhere. The characters of the wicked, wily advisors are colorful devices to convey Tacitus’ pessimism about the institution of empire. Given his disillusionment, it is no wonder that we witness such dark characters as Sejanus and Tigellinus, accomplices and agitators to imperial excess.

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