

Prophecy by Accident: Omens in Tacitus' *Annals*

While much has been written about Tacitus' treatment of miracles, oracles, and prodigies in terms of their utility and distortion in imperial propaganda (cf. Gwyn Morgan 1996, Haynes 2003: 123–36), and, more recently, in relation to Roman state religion (Davies 2004, Shannon-Henderson 2019), less attention has been paid to his works' engagement with and use of chance omens: ordinary gestures or utterances that provide an unexpected glimpse of the future. The Roman historical tradition had a rich store of stories about careless words that ended up portending death or unexpected exclamations that presaged victory (Cic. *Div.* 1.102-104, Val. Max. 1.5, cf. North 1990). The highly folkloric nature of such anecdotes, however, and the skepticism that they could provoke even in antiquity (Cic. *Div.* 2.83, cf. Champlin 2008), has made them somewhat embarrassing when they appear in “serious” historians such as Tacitus.

In this paper, I build on recent work on the verification of *mirabilia* (e.g. Shannon-Henderson 2013) to show how Tacitus builds authority for the problematic category of the chance omens, which represent a popular and rumor-laden intrusion into the historiographical narrative (Ripat 2006); averted omens and attempts to avert omens, such as Agrippina's decision to murder Claudius after he makes a pronouncement that would seem to predict her downfall (Ann. 12.64.2) or Nero's refusal of a temple in his honor because being “emperors are only called *divi* after their deaths” (15.74.2) raise the possibility that recognizing an omen is what causes it to have predictive force (cf. *Hist.* 2.78.2). Unlike prodigies, reported to the senate who evaluates and determines their meaning, or even such identifiable (if often unreliable, as Tacitus states in the digression at Ann. 6.22.4) sources of prophecy as oracles and astrologers, omens can be found anywhere and read back into anything. From the historian's perspective, all such omens have by definition been proven *ex eventu*, regardless of whether they really occurred as prophetic

events. In his comparatively selective reporting of omens Tacitus vigorously defends the historicity of the prophetic utterances he includes with standard historiographical techniques of rhetorical proof, from congruency with known character to documentation. Anecdotes about Tiberius' prophecy of Galba's accession and his allusive prescience about his grandsons' fates (*Ann.* 6.20.2, 6.46.4) are bolstered by reference to Tiberius' *scientia* in astrology and famed *providentia* -- an imperial virtue that encompasses shrewd political analysis that verges into superhuman provision for the future (Charlesworth 1936, Béranger 1960). The potential omens of Nero's downfall, meanwhile, have physical instantiation. Nero inscribes and dedicates the dagger used by the Pisonian conspirators to "Jupiter the Avenger" (*IOVI VINDICI*, inadvertently presaging the revolt of Julius Vindex (*Ann.* 15.74.2), and the abortive proposal to deify him appears in the *acta senatus*. In this way, Tacitus separates his credence in the "real" omens that he presents from vulgar credulity, and supports own deployment of unwittingly prophetic words and gestures in the *Annals*.

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