

The Motivations of Valens' Army in Tacitus' *Histories*

Fabius Valens, one of Vitellius' most valued commanders in his bid for imperial power, plays a vital role in Tacitus' commentary on morality and the politics of control. M. Gwyn Morgan (1994) has focused on the similarities and differences between Valens' (1.63-66) and his colleague Caecina's (1.67-70) parallel adventures north of the Alps. Adopting a more character-driven perspective, my paper explores the ramifications of Valens' entire narrative before the Battle of Bedriacum (2.39-45). Specifically, I show how madness and greed, distinct motivating forces in Tacitus' narrative, evolve as Valens navigates the dangers of commanding an army during a civil war. Valens, far from the feckless commander he is made out to be (Morgan 1994, Powell 1972), successfully ends his army's impulse towards *furor*, and replaces it with the almost-as-unsavory desire for money. Tacitus subtly suggests that Valens, as the soldiers' source of that money, is thereby able for a time to regulate their behavior—albeit by unethically exacting money from Gallic allies and bribing his army with a portion of that money. Despite his generosity (*prodigus* 1.66), his soldiers, on the eve of reunion with Caecina south of the Alps, mutiny out of a desire for Gallic gold they believe Valens to be hoarding (2.27-30). Thus the greed Valens himself possesses and has instilled in the soldiery is very nearly his undoing: Valens survives by hiding in slave-clothes while the camp is ransacked, and when no treasure is found the mutiny subsides. Though madness is a recurrent theme in Roman treatments of mutinies (Manolaraki 2003) and elsewhere in Tacitus (Woodman 2006), it never appears in 2.27-30.

Such absence of madness, where we would most expect it, attests to the commander's skill, especially when we consider how mad the legions were when the march began. The Vitellian narrative's introduction (1.51-4) places considerable emphasis on the army's avarice

(*ferox praedā gloriāque* 1.51). Yet when Valens first encounters a hostile town, Tacitus surprisingly denies the role greed or plunder played (*non ob praedam aut spoliandi cupidine*), instead explaining that the soldiers acted out of *furore et rabie et causis incertis* (1.63). Tacitus only rarely resorts to madness to explain military indiscipline (Manolaraki 2003); such editorializing, therefore, requires attention. The juxtaposition of madness and the unexplainable suggests that the soldiers are wild men, ungovernable by the normal modes of motivation. Valens has his work cut out for him. He eventually quiets the frenzy with supplication, but only after 4000 innocent allies are slain. Nearby towns get word of what has transpired and greet the army with their own abject supplication to appease the legions' *ira*. This precarious balance between war and peace, which Valens can barely maintain, lasts for the next several towns on the march. Tacitus is ominously silent on whether blood is being shed.

The equation changes, however, when the pro-Vitellian Lugdunenses appeal to Valens' men for vengeance against their rivals, the pro-Galbanian Viennenses. The enticement of Gallic booty is at the heart of the appeal, which seems to activate, finally, this desire in the soldiers: Valens and his fellow officers, apparently afraid that the supplications will not be enough this time to assuage the frenzy (*iracundiam* 1.66), offer each soldier 3000 HS. This bare statement, placed as it is between the favorably-received *verba Fabi* and the preservation of the *dignitas* of Vienne (1.66), lends a sardonic air to any wholesome details (Damon 2003): money is the day's real savior. Valens' ability to get his men to accept payment over plunder is significant, when we recall the detail from the introduction that the Vitellian army *praemia quam stipendia malebat* (1.51). This shift from desiring plunder to accepting bribery, though perhaps only a modest improvement ethically, allows Valens to systematize criminality—with himself, as the one responsible for exacting the bribe-money, at the top of the heap. It is important to realize that,

before Valens offered the bribe of 3000 HS, his record was clean. He—and Tacitus—understand that, in the corrupt world of civil war, a commander has to get his hands dirty if he wants to keep hold of the reins.

Bibliography

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