

Positively Biased: Tacitus on the Mutinies in Pannonia and Germany

Recent scholarship on Tacitus has focused on the relationship between the historical Rome that Tacitus was narrating and the present-day Rome that Tacitus was experiencing (Williams 1997; Woodman 1998; Ash 1999; Sailor 2008). In this paper, I contribute to this program of close literary analyses of Tacitus by suggesting that, from his unique historical perspective, Tacitus recounts the mutinies in Pannonia and Germany as a foreshadowing of what the empire as a whole would become if the public would persist in actions mutinous to the ideals of Roman life. With style and clever manipulation of the bias presented in his work, Tacitus makes obvious and ugly the destructive behaviors of the characters involved in the mutinies, equating the condition of the military as a microcosm of the impending state of the Empire. Therefore, I argue for an appreciation of the bias in Tacitus by examining the expressive portrayal of the mutinies in the first book of the *Annals* as a meta-historiographical commentary on the state of Rome itself at the time of the historian's writing.

The account of the mutiny in Pannonia begins when Blaesus calls a holiday at the news of Augustus' death and the succession of Tiberius; Tacitus blames the incitement of the mutiny on "easy living and idleness." The soldier who began the mutiny was Percennius, a former applause-leader of the Roman theatre, well-skilled in manipulating his audience toward action. Percennius rouses discontentment by pointing out that soldiers serve "like slaves." Because a clever slave is often the *architectus* of a Roman comedy, this dangerous detail is richly significant. In defiance of martial authority, the men release fellow soldiers imprisoned for deserting or murder and do "everything possible to arouse sympathy, indignation, ill-feeling, and panic." As chaos increases, the foot-soldier Vibulenus offers a heart-wrenching account of his own brother's unjust murder by order of the commander. Incited to capture the general's

household, the mutineers would have killed the general himself “if it had not rapidly come to light that there was no body . . . that Vibulenus had never had a brother.” The mutiny subsides as Drusus, taking advantage of a lunar eclipse as an ill-omen, convinces the soldiers that “[r]eform by collective agitation is slow in coming: individuals can earn goodwill and win its rewards straightaway.” Emphasizing and perhaps exaggerating the manipulative voices of Percennius, Vibulenus, and Drusus, Tacitus himself manipulates bias in his account to criticize the mob mentality of the mutineers, implicitly warning against the dangers of listening freely to the rhetoric of political change in the unstable law courts of Rome.

As at Pannonia, the mutiny in Germany broke out when several brigades were occupied with “light duty, or none at all.” Both mutinies began in idleness, and Tacitus hints at the discontent and trouble bound to plague Rome itself if citizens would not relinquish the pettiness of personal concerns to work for the better administration of the government. While criticizing the mutinies as unwise, Tacitus acknowledges the real need for reform, refusing to shy away from “the exposure of the unpleasant,” reporting the “severely scarred, beaten, and lashed” bodies of soldiers, “not of Livian heroes but of Tacitean slaves.” To quell this mutiny, Germanicus, in consultation with loyal men from the mutinous brigades, made a plan in which “the grossest offenders were to be struck down.” Executed “unlike any other civil war,” soldiers who were not enemies but comrades, “who had eaten together by day and rested together by night, took sides and fought each other.” Tacitus colors this scene with pathos by writing that “shrieks, wounds, and blood were unmistakable. But motives were mysterious, fates unpredictable.” Tacitus’ account of the mutiny in Germany highlights the bitterness of harsh authority and the danger of disregarding the responsibilities of common citizenship.

Having experienced the political chaos of the latter half of the first century and having already written about it in the *Histories*, Tacitus portrays the degeneration of military discipline in the *Annals* as a succinct picture of the impending turmoil within the State, which was threatened by corruption of morality and the Roman ideal of honor over personal prosperity. This project, by closely examining the portrayal of the mutinies in the first book of Tacitus' *Annals*, sheds new light on the acknowledged issue of positive bias in the historiography of Tacitus.

Bibliography

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Direct quotes taken from *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Trans. Michael Grant. London: Penguin Books, 1989.