

Tacitus' Rhetorical Characterization of Galba

This paper will argue that although Galba has his weaker moments and is not altogether an exemplary example of a good emperor, he is not nearly so terrible as his enemies would have one believe. Tacitus' portrayal of him is multi-layered, and seems at times conflicting, but when examined carefully, the views presented can be understood in light of the whole. Tacitus, when speaking as narrator or having Galba (or a Galban sympathizer, such as Piso) give a speech, portrays Galba in a more positive than negative light, and often gives reasons or excuses if Galba did something which could be considered reprehensible. On the other hand, whenever the view of Otho or another opponent of Galba is being presented, the characterization of Galba is not so favorable.

Tacitus uses several literary techniques in his character portrayals, such as direct description, innuendo, and contrast, which can take the form of direct comparison or dramatic interplay between characters (Daitz 34). The technique of contrast can especially be seen in the relationship of Galba and Otho. Tacitus does give some direct description of Galba, and we can gain insight into Galba's character through the speeches he makes, but when Otho speaks he is rather cutting in his accusations against Galba, and his speeches speak to his own character at least as much, if not more than, to Galba's character. The interplay between Galba and Otho strongly shows the "impact of the characters upon each other" (Daitz 50). While Otho certainly tries to fit Galba into the rhetorical tyrant category, Tacitus' overall depiction of Galba does not merit him a concrete place in that category.

Marincola points out that speeches can reveal character and help us to understand the attendant circumstances of actions (Marincola 124). Even if the speeches do not correspond verbatim with what was said, they still provide a portrait of the speaker's character. Otho goes to

great lengths to vilify Galba through the use of language, even using Galba's purported use of language to do so. He gives no excuses of any sort for Galba's actions, and speaks with the exaggeration and hate of one who has been slighted and wants revenge. He paints Galba as a harsh, cruel tyrant with no regard for human life. Tacitus, on the other hand, gives a seemingly more objective view of Galba's actions, which is logical, given Tacitus' position as historian and Otho's position as Galba's opponent. Tacitus is by no means effusive in his praise of Galba, but he gives him credit where credit is due and acknowledges his faults fairly, without the vitriol Otho displays towards him.

In conclusion, Tacitus uses rhetoric to paint a complex portrayal of Galba. He seems to portray Galba as a decent fellow, if sometimes clueless as to the right course of action. By means of Otho's speeches, Tacitus gives us a picture of how Galba's enemies viewed him. Otho had a strong dislike of Galba, and that colored his ideas and depictions of him. He viewed a stern, strict man as a tyrant, likely unfairly. The dramatic interplay between the two characters provides a clearer illustration not only of their character and personality, but also of the larger historical events at hand.

Bibliography

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