

Figured Speech as Knowledge of Politics: Piso and Otho in Tacitus, *Histories* I

Frederick Ahl has demonstrated the importance for classical rhetoric of the frameworks that speech marked by *deinotes* employed for making the audience aware of the things that speakers left unsaid (Ahl, 1984, pp. 176 *ff.*). Talented speakers communicated by means of a *schema* through which the audience understood more than what the speaker, at a superficial level, said. On the basis of Ahl's findings, we can begin to think about changes in Roman understandings of politics by tracking what *schemata* fail or succeed at one time or another. A rhetorical approach applied over a period of seven centuries will not look the same in each case; people's ability to rethink the manner of figured speech had very real consequences for how they lived together – or, for that matter, died.

In this paper, I will give an account of the modes of figured speech employed by Piso and Otho in their orations to their legions in the first book of Tacitus' *Histories*, in order to prepare the way for an analysis of Tacitus' theorization of the political structures and values of the Principate. As Patrick Sinclair has shown, varied rhetorical strategies in Tacitus' writings stand for general views of the sources of political legitimacy (Sinclair, 1995, p. 133). The differences that Tacitus marks between their rhetorical approaches indicate the contours of his theoretical understanding of rhetoric (Levene, 1999, p. 197), and furthermore, I will argue, serve to outline his theory of politics under the Principate.

Piso's aims are figured in terms of concern for the state (Keitel, 1991, p. 2776), a strategy that fails to define a set of common goals between himself and his audience. He articulates a *schema*, which I will discuss in detail in the paper, centered on the legitimate nature of his adoption (Tac. *Hist.* 1.29.2 *ff.*). Legitimacy is figured in terms of *res publica*, *senatus*, and

populus (Tac. *Hist.* 1.30.2). The *schema* of Piso's speech might be filled in by the audience so as to supply plausible arguments in another context, but in the conditions under which he gives it, his rhetoric is sharply disconnected from what the soldiers take to be the facts of political life. Otho's speech is just as "figured" as Piso's, if not more so (Keitel, 2779), but the surface that he presents is grounded in categories meaningful to his audience; his rhetoric draws on the workings of politics that his audience have actually encountered (Haynes, 2003, pp. 53-4). Otho's speech could be understood as a "perversion of language" (Keitel, 2780), or perhaps as an indication of a new language that Piso and Galba do not know how to speak. The central point of Otho's speech is that his Praetorian audience will only be safe if his power is put on a solid footing (Tac. *Hist.* 1.37.1-2). Strictly speaking, this may not be true, but it provides a framework for understanding the political situation that should drive the audience to action as Piso was not able to.

Unfortunately, the conclusion Tacitus reaches in the *Histories* seems to be that the moral ends served by the new language of politics are for the most part bad (Levene, 214). His analysis must nonetheless be studied closely, to determine whether and how Romans reacted to disasters such as those of 69 C.E. to use their new political language more constructively. A more extensive reading of Tacitus' works that begins with this paper will consider where deliberative oratory leads to positive outcomes for the public welfare, and what kinds of figurations it uses to present arguments to an audience. Along with an analysis of deliberation in theory and practice in the writings of Quintilian and Pliny, such a project will illuminate the Roman understanding of the limits to which political life was subject, and the possibilities it contained, under the Emperors, and show how they were able to articulate new meanings for value terms such as *libertas* and *res publica* in changing conditions.

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