

## Tyranny and Tragedy in Vespasian's Healing Miracles: Tacitus' *Histories* 4.81.1

This paper argues that Tacitus' *Histories* 4.81, an account of Vespasian's healing miracles in Alexandria, deliberately uses an enigmatic narrative logic in order to signal first the impossibility of the miracle, and second, more significantly, a fundamental change in the symbolic paradigm to one of superstitious belief. This change arrives simultaneously with the open acknowledgment of the military as the source of the emperor's power. The passage is heavily studied for the impact of Vespasian's miracles on the dissemination of Flavian power (Morenz 1949/50; Heinrichs 1968; von Zieten 1994; Levick 1999 [n. 6], 68–9, 227–8). These accounts take the narrative at face value. However the narrative logic is often opaque, creating difficulties of interpretation that the scholarship elides in its effort to further historical understanding of the events: 1) the new emperor first doubts his ability; 2) the priests, the progression of whose argument mirrors Tacitus' own, encourage him to try; 3) Vespasian thereupon "believing that his good fortune was capable of anything and that nothing was any longer incredible" performs the miracle. Vespasian's rapid transition from a doubt that aligns with ordinary understanding of the world to total belief that completely defies it, is itself difficult to understand. The attempt to explain it as a result of the priests' encouragement encounters the difficulty of the priests' logic: 1) the diseases might respond to ordinary medical attention; 2) this might be the gods' will and Vespasian divinely chosen; 3) if the men are healed Vespasian will receive credit; if not, it is the men who will be ridiculed. This logic originates, like Vespasian's initial doubt, in rational belief and the laws of nature. It then appeals to the opposite, the will of the gods, and concludes with a scenario in which neither one matters: Vespasian emerges as winner backed by no law, either sacred or profane. Thus though the event

certainly bears on the success of Vespasian's accession, through his style and narrative Tacitus primarily calls attention to its paradoxical status as an impossibility that nevertheless occurs. His main point is to create interpretive impasses, expressing the ideological shift that allows for accepting the emperor as a living god. This takes place on the narrative level in the form of logical problems such as contradiction and non-sequitur. Therefore scholarship interested in the event and its outcomes construe them at the expense of Tacitus' own interest in representing a much more fundamental shift in the symbolic conditions in which it takes place. It "overreads" Tacitus in the attempt to make the sense it wishes to see.

Extrapolating more broadly from the interpretation of this key passage, I argue that Tacitus perceives the Roman imperial system as playing out historically the political philosophy that underlies the aesthetics of Greek tragedy, an idea suggested by Seth Benardete (ed. Burger 2002, 216). Scholarship on the dramatic elements of Tacitus' narrative has so far recognized an inherent theatricality in the principate, describing the literary metaphors that Tacitus exploits to represent it (Santoro L'Hoir 2006; Woodman 1993). However no one argues for the principate *as* a tragedy, rather than as *like* a tragedy. I claim that Tacitus reproduces in his own "impossible" language the loss of boundary between actual and poetic realities that occurs when both Vespasian and his subjects believe (and, as Tacitus emphasizes in the case of the latter, objectively report upon) Vespasian's miracles. Similarly tragedy stages an irreconcilable conflict between human and divine law. The latter, unwritten and guaranteed by the poetic construct of Hades, conflicts with the political realities of the former—a conflict that ramifies in tyranny. The logical impasses of Tacitus' narrative therefore reproduce the symbolic conditions in which tyranny arises: the collapse of the literal and figurative in the person of the miracle-working emperor. In Rome, this collapse is no longer presented as an image through which the

spectator can reflect upon himself, as in Greek tragedy, but the real condition of life. In such an “unpoetic” situation the only form of knowledge is superstition; a taking-for-real what should properly be the subject of interpretation.

#### Bibliography

Burger, R. (ed.). 2002. *Encounters and Reflections: Conversations with Seth Benardete*.

Chicago.

Morenz, S. 1949/50. “Vespasian, Heiland der Kranken: Persönliche Frömmigkeit im antiken Herrscherkult?” *WJA* 4, 370–8.

Henrichs, A. 1968. ‘Vespasian’s Visit to Alexandria’, *ZPE* 3, 51–80.

von Zieten, G. 1994. “Heilung und römischer Kaiserkult”, *SudArch* 78, 171–91.

Levick, B. 1999. *Vespasian*. London.

Santoro L’Hoir, Francesca. 2006. *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus’*

*Annales*. Michigan.

Woodman, A. J. 1993. “Amateur Dramatics at the Court of Nero: Annals 15.48-74”. *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman, eds., 104-28. Princeton.