

Conspicuous by Their Absence: Cassius and Brutus in the Works of Tacitus

Tacitus is an unlikely source for our study of Cassius and Brutus, as they stand outside the chronological framework of Tacitus' historical writings. Nonetheless, they do appear a number of times throughout his works, and Tacitus provides them with a more nuanced treatment than might be expected. This paper will explore how Tacitus depicts Cassius and Brutus as figures of memory as it pertains to liberty and treason.

In the historical works, Tacitus' references to Brutus and Cassius most commonly refer to their role in the civil wars of the Republic (*Ann.* 1.2.1; *Hist.* 1.50.3). Yet in several passages, Tacitus portrays Brutus and Cassius as figures of memory and imparts to them a significance more nuanced than their roles merely as opponents of Caesar and Augustus. Tacitus' obituary of Junia Tertia provides a striking description of Brutus and Cassius (*Ann.* 3.76). Tacitus does not tell us who Junia's parents were, rather he highlights that Junia was the niece of Cato, wife of Cassius, and sister of Brutus, important relatives to be sure, but also the most prominent members of the resistance to Caesar and Augustus. Tacitus closes the obituary with his famous line on the omission of the *imagines* of Cassius and Brutus, who were all the more conspicuous for their absence from Junia's funeral procession (*Ann.* 3.76.2). This passage demonstrates Tacitus' willingness to keep alive the memory of republican dissidents in the face of the increasing autocracy of the Principate, soon to be exposed in all its brutality in the figure of Sejanus.

In the following book, Tacitus records the trial of Cremutius Cordus, who was accused of treason for praising Brutus and calling Cassius the last of the Romans (*Ann.* 4.34.1, *Romanorum ultimum*). In his defense, Cremutius cites Livy, who described Cassius and Brutus as eminent

(*insignes*) rather than as brigands and parricides (4.34.3 *latrones et parricidas*), which according to Cremutius was how they were described in his day. Tacitus himself follows Cremutius' practice and never directly names them as the assassins of Caesar. Cremutius, in language that is remarkably similar to Tacitus' at *Annales* 3.76, mentions that while Cassius and Brutus were killed seventy years prior, they were known both from their images, which were not abolished by the victor, and by historical accounts (4.35.2). Cremutius closes his speech by suggesting that he would be remembered along with Cassius and Brutus (4.35.3, '*nec derunt, si damnatio ingruit, qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, sed etiam mei meminerint*').

Brutus is not mentioned again in the surviving *Annales*, but Cassius returns to the narrative in book sixteen as the means for the condemnation of his descendant and namesake C. Cassius Longinus, who was charged with venerating a bust of Cassius the tyrannicide inscribed 'to the leader of the faction' (*Ann.* 16.7.2 *duci partium*). Tacitus' readers likely never saw Cassius' inscribed bust, but thanks to Tacitus' writings we have read the inscription and have come to know the nature of the Principate that ordered the exile of its owner.

In book four of the *Historiae*, Tacitus provides an account of the debate between Helvidius Priscus, Thrasea Paetus' son-in-law, and Eprius Marcellus over political prosecutions under Nero (4.8.3). Eprius Marcellus sarcastically compared Helvidius to Brutus and Cato for his bravery (*fortitudo*) and resolve (*constantia*). Helvidius was not on trial at the time, but the comparison to Brutus and Cato was an ominous suggestion. Marcellus puts the comparison of Helvidius with Cato and Brutus in the context of opposition to the emperor Vespasian, who, as he notes, possessed considerable power and resources.

That Tacitus chose to recognize how imperial regimes from Tiberius to Vespasian weaponized the memory of Brutus and Cassius should come as no surprise given his

documentation of so many of the Principate's authoritarian tendencies. Tacitus takes up the interpretation of Brutus and Cassius as traitors, yet he does so not to strengthen that thread of interpretation but to show the dangerous ends to which it could be employed.

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