

The *Princeps* and the *Pauper*: Tacitus and the Shame of Aristocratic Welfare

Membership in the senatorial and equestrian orders during the first centuries of the Roman Empire depended purely upon money, and if an aristocrat lost sufficient income to keep their place, they ran the risk of dropping out of one order into another, or out of the formal aristocracy altogether. This recurrent demographic problem caused nearly every Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperor to intervene to bolster the wealth of select aristocrats (Martin 1981: 122, Veyne 1990: 358), as seen primarily in Tacitus, who provides our best narratives of when this practice, which one might call “aristocratic welfare”, benefited unfortunate “poor” elites. This paper investigates the rhetoric and narratives Tacitus deploys to tell the stories of poor aristocrats who received imperial benefaction, and how his framing of debates about aristocratic welfare between emperors, senators, and recipients plays into his characterization of the emperor Tiberius and Tacitus’ thought on the morality of wealth and poverty more broadly.

In a paradigmatic episode (*Annals* 2.37-38) Tiberius responds to a request for aid from Marcus Hortensius Hortalus, asking for pity (*miser cordiae*) for his familial poverty and personal fecklessness; the Hortensii had needed similar assistance a generation before. The imperial response – that the emperor cannot alleviate the suffering of every *pauper* (2.38) – presents a rationalist argument against charity in general, especially between emperors and aristocrats. Throughout Tacitus emphasizes the emperor's haughty, unlikable demeanor, and his opposition to the senate, in the face of Hortensius' need: he listens disdainfully (*superbius*) and opposes Hortensius partially because the senators favor him (*inclinatio senatus incitamentum Tiberio*). Surprisingly, Tiberius softens

immediately thereafter and grants Hortensius sufficient money to maintain his family's station (as he frequently did: Mellor 1993: 43), but the story provides the unhappy ending that the Hortensii "fell into shameful poverty" (*pudendam ad inopiam delaberetur*).

Instead of presenting a story with a hero or a villain, Tacitus sculpts the scene into a more ambiguous tableau, with emperor and senator both negotiating their interaction, whether considered as patron and client or benefactor and recipient, in terms of their relationships to shame, generosity, and power imbalance. Tacitus' presentation of aristocratic welfare in this incident has less to do with outright support for the policy or not as much as employing it as an avenue for revealing character: Tiberius as mercurial and stingy, yet unpredictable, and Hortensius as perhaps an emblem of a weak, ineffectual nobility, who seems more deserving of pity than compassion.

By and large incidents of this type adhere to related narrative patterns: individual acts of well-deserved imperial charity caused no commotion, but that repeated ones demonstrate weakness of character in the receiver, as seen in multiple chapters in the *Annals* (e.g., 1.75, 2.48, 4.44, 12.52). At times Tacitus praises poor senators (*laudati*), occasionally for seeking deserved help, but also for slinking out of the Senate voluntarily without causing a spectacle. Thus *pudor* attached itself to a subset of the senators who required social maintenance, not as an innate quality of elite *paupertas*, but as a measure of how they handled it. Thus shame, as a result of various moral criteria, operates as part of the internal sociology of the aristocracy when faced with accepting aid from others, especially the *princeps*. As part of larger thematic trajectories within the *Annals*, Tacitus' narratives of aristocratic welfare emphasize how even generosity and giving had been weaponized by the imperial family against increasingly impotent senators.

Bibliography

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