

UNSTABLE AUTHORITY IN TACITUS' *HISTORIES* 1 AND 2

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis examines authority in Tacitus' *Histories* 1 and 2 and how it becomes unstable. The *Histories* are centered on authority as it is eagerly sought, initially gained, achieved, and lost. I endeavor to track the authority of Galba and Otho as it travels through these four phases, and thus clarify what, according to Tacitus, went wrong during these two reigns and caused them to fail. I then turn to examine Tacitus himself and how he strives for authority as a historian writing about such instability.

In the *Histories* 1 and 2, Tacitus relates the reigns of Galba and Otho through to the end. He begins with Galba's *imperium* already in decline, and then shows how Galba's authority is lost through his own character flaws, his adoption of Piso, and his poor relations with the soldiers. While Galba is losing authority, Otho is gaining it through flattery and generosity towards the soldiers. Otho is nothing like the old, severe Galba, but much like the decadent, youthful Nero. Yet after removing the aged emperor and gaining the *imperium* for himself, Otho experiences his own unstable authority. His chain of command is so dysfunctional that wise counsel is ignored and mutiny is rampant. Because good generals are despised by wildly overzealous troops, victory against the Vitellians is impossible and Otho meets his ruin. Thus both emperors suffer failure due to unstable authority.

In contrast to Galba and Otho, Tacitus himself achieves strong authority as a history writer. He frames his first two books of the *Histories* with direct authorial addresses which allow him to position himself among good historians who write *pari eloquentia ac libertate* (1.1.1), and contrast himself with bad historians who write *in adulationem* (2.101.1). Throughout the rest of the text, Tacitus balances digressions, impersonal statements, and direct first person assertions to show a firm yet fair command of his work. Although he writes of unstable authority, Tacitus exhibits strong control over his narrative and proves himself especially worthy of writing about this turbulent year.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In the year 69 CE, Rome fell under the authority of four emperors. Galba came first, but quickly lost his *imperium*¹ to Otho. Otho was able to hold a longer command, but Vitellius threatened his power right from the start and eventually gained the emperorship for himself. Yet he too would perish, making way for Vespasian and his sons.

In the *Histories* 1 and 2, Tacitus charts the authority of Galba and Otho through to the end. He begins with Galba's *imperium* already in jeopardy, and then proceeds to show how Galba's character flaws, adoption, and poor relations with the troops hasten his ruin. For Otho, Tacitus elaborates on his rebellious rise to power, his liberality to the soldiers with rewards and flattery, and his *imperium* in relation to a broken chain of command. Indeed, the *Histories* are centered on authority as it is eagerly sought, initially gained, achieved, and lost. I endeavor to track the authority of Galba and Otho as it moves through these four phases, and thus clarify what, according to Tacitus, went wrong during these two reigns to cause unstable *imperium*, challenges against authority, and consequent failure. Then I examine how Tacitus establishes authority of his own as a historian writing about these challenges to unstable authority.

The authority of Galba differs so greatly from that of Otho. The two rise to power, strive for authority, secure it, and lose it in widely different ways. Whereas Galba loses his authority right from the outset of the *Histories*, Otho's full rise through a coup is depicted. Galba tries to gain authority through harsh discipline and adoption of Piso, Otho through rewards and flattery. Galba's authority is secure only with a few high-ranking individuals, but Otho can depend on the fidelity of the entire common soldiery. Galba loses authority primarily because of his own faults, while Otho falls prey to a broken chain of command. The multiple points of contrast provide

¹ I use the word *imperium* in this thesis to refer to imperial power; *OLD* 1c.

sufficient material for a fruitful analysis. In addition, the two emperors are ideal as a pair because they are interlocked in the narrative: as Galba loses authority, so Otho gains it.

Vitellius is excluded because his authority mirrors that of Otho. Both are labeled for their extravagance and have problems with their commanders and troops. In addition, Caecina and Valens are the prime figures of authority for the Vitellians until late in Book 2. Vitellius himself is hardly mentioned in the first 57 chapters of this book, presumably because he is gathering forces from Germany (2.57.1). Vitellius is so detached from the action of the first half of Book 2 that, even after Bedriacum, he is *victoriae suae nescius* (2.57.1). Only after this point does he begin to show signs of his own (yet still Otho-like) authority.

Essentially I engage in a close reading of *Histories* 1 and 2, with much help from the commentaries by Damon and Ash. When reading, I pay special attention to repeating words (such as *auctoritas*, *severitas* or *avaritia*), and themes (like disobedience due to excessive zeal), which suggest the perfect recipe for unstable authority.

Three studies of the *Histories* in particular have illuminated my efforts: *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories* by Ash, *Seditio: Military Disintegration in Tacitus' Histories* by Manolaraki, and *The History of Make-Believe: Tacitus on Imperial Rome* by Haynes. Ash seeks “to analyze how Tacitus in the *Histories* responds to such distinctive problems of narrating civil war, particularly in his characterization of leaders and soldiers” (1999.3). She begins by comparing the Galbians and Othonians, arguing that the Galbians are the most obscure of the four armies, but their characterization can be summed up in *Histories* 1.18, Galba’s speech to the troops. First, Tacitus distinguishes between officers and soldiers; the former respond favorably to Galba, the latter with grim silence. This shows a rift in the hierarchy and a difference in motivations. Second, the soldiers are motivated not by loyalty, but by money.

Third, the discontentment of the Galbians is nursed slowly and passively and is not an explosive kind of strife. This behavior contrasts with the Othonians, who learn that violence gets them what they want (1999.31). A broken hierarchy does not help the situation. While the Othonians become increasingly loyal to Otho, they learn to hate their officers. Through these characteristics Tacitus demonstrates that an emperor cannot depend on popularity and generosity in order to be successful, but he must also have a strong hierarchy of officers (1999.35). Ash also analyzes the characteristics of individual leaders and Tacitus' way of tying them "in close connection with the collective identities of the soldiers" (1999.73). Through the soldiers' eyes, Tacitus makes Galba appear old, stingy, and overly strict. His positive qualities are carefully omitted, and the narrative begins with Galba's luck already running out. Tacitus' characterization of Otho is quite different: he is sometimes a soldier, sometimes a decadent emperor like Nero. Ash concludes that "Tacitus' characterization of Otho is complex and challenging, and raises questions about the nature of power" (1999.94). These types of observations are vital to the understanding of the authority of Galba and Otho. In contrast to Ash, however, my study focuses not on the armies themselves, but how the armies interact with the authority of their emperors.

Manolaraki continues this discussion of dynamics between troops and leaders in her dissertation. Yet Manolaraki takes this relationship of commanders and armies one step further to examine specifically the motif of mutiny. She is the first to assert that "the mutinies in the *Histories* are the essential fabric within which Tacitus weaves his story of AD 69 and elaborates his literary, political, and meta-historical concerns" (2003.2-3). Because the *Histories* really are "essentially the narrative of successive mutinies" (2003.2), Manolaraki's analysis of the *topos* and structure of mutiny allows readers to better navigate the various complex revolts in Tacitus' text, and thus is a much needed contribution to Tacitean scholarship. In her last chapter,

Manolaraki boldly argues that the praetorian mutiny (*Hist.* 1.80-4) provides an “interpretive blueprint” to understanding the overall structure of mutiny in the *Histories* (2003.109). Her methodology is a comparison of mutinies within Latin literature (particularly in Livy), and then within the *Histories*, focused specifically on themes, structure, and vocabulary. The final conclusion is that mutinies “are not just decorative elements,” but the fabric by which Tacitus communicates the political and military complexities of the year 69. Her work therefore has been helpful in understanding the *Histories* as a whole, but more specifically in understanding the breakdown of authority in relation to mutiny. Manolaraki brings us one step closer to my idea of unstable authority.

As much as Ash and Manolaraki complement each other, *The Histories of Make-Believe: Tacitus on Imperial Rome* by Haynes stands in complete contrast. She diverges from the vein of these previous two scholars and ventures down a road entirely of her own. Her work is theoretical and philosophical, and argues that “Tacitus unifies the style and content of his historiography in order to produce in the reader the experience of believing and understanding as the actors in the text do” (2003.3). Her second chapter is most relevant to my own study, since it discusses the chaos of the year 69 in relation to Nero’s death. Nero is a *species* in that his “absence represents the gap between the unbearable ‘real’ that is beyond language, symbolization, narrative, and therefore ideology, and the symbolically structured ‘reality’ in which Roman society actually operates” (2003.35). The men of AD 69, then, are images of an image. Galba “exists as a projection of public feeling about the absent Nero” (2003.46), while Otho evokes Nero and acts as his “placeholder” (2003.63). The greatest benefit of this book comes from taking these abstract views of the emperors and adding them to what Ash has already laid out about their characters. Once viewed through the lenses of make-believe, Galba

and Otho take on new images. Furthermore, Haynes paves the way for an understanding of Tacitus' method of history writing, which I take up in the final chapter of this thesis.

For information on the historical facts of the Long Year, I rely on Morgan's book *69 AD The Year of Four Emperors*. Morgan reconstructs in exhaustive detail the military and political intricacies of the year 69. He focuses on Tacitus' account in particular, and so claims that "this book may be able to function as a kind of companion to the *Histories*" (2006.10). The chapters walk the reader through the events much in the same way that Tacitus' account does, but the advantage to reading this book side-by-side with the *Histories* is this: Morgan fills in the blanks and reveals details which Tacitus omits. For example, Tacitus begins his *Histories* when Galba is already losing favor. Morgan opens his book with important facts on the Julio-Claudians and the end of Nero's reign, so his readers are then prepared to read about Galba from the very start of his involvement up through Tacitus' beginning. By providing additional historical details, Morgan bridges information gaps to help readers of Tacitus grasp complexities of all sorts concerning the *Histories*.

Tacitus the Sententious Historian by Sinclair and *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* by Marincola become vital in my chapter on Tacitus' authority as a historian. Sinclair provides information on how Tacitus builds authorial expression through certain vocabulary, phrases, and narrative structure. Marincola analyzes Tacitus' authority directly, and explains how Tacitus places himself among distinguished historians who wrote *pari eloquentia ac libertate* (1.1.1).

My study of unstable authority in the *Histories* 1 and 2 proceeds as follows. Chapter one takes Galba as the starting point. I examine how he becomes emperor, how he strives to gain authority, what authority he actually manages to gain, and what causes his authority to become

unstable. Because Tacitus begins the *Histories* with Galba's authority already on the decline, very little can be said about Galba's rise to the emperorship, but much about his loss of authority.

Chapter two applies these same four questions to Otho, but is more complex. Otho's reign bridges *Histories* 1 and 2 (approximately 90 chapters) and is recorded in full from the seizure of authority from one emperor to the loss of authority to another. For the sake of clarity, the evidence is organized more or less chronologically rather than topically (as with Galba). A significant amount of time is allotted to analysis of the coup, but again unstable authority receives the most attention.

Chapter three turns to the author himself and analyzes how Tacitus establishes authority as a historian and places himself in the tradition of history writers. Books 1 and 2 are framed by two remarkable moments when Tacitus speaks in the first person. In addition to these blatant authorial appearances, Tacitus makes his presence known throughout the work in less overt ways, by means of first person verbs and pronouns, digressions, and impersonal phrases. A careful mix of bold assertion and subtle suggestion allows him to control his narrative without losing the trust of his audience. With all things combined, Tacitus succeeds in attaining authority and claims a spot among the best of Roman historians.

The *Histories* are centered on the ebb and flow of authority during the Long Year. As the emperors gain *imperium*, strive for support, solidify fidelity or lose authority, the chaos of civil war becomes apparent. By working through the four phases mentioned above, I will show what caused unstable authority and consequent ruin for Galba and Otho in the year 69, and what caused Tacitus to be especially worthy of writing about this turbulent year.

CHAPTER 2 THE AUTHORITY OF GALBA

How Did Galba Become Emperor?

In the *Histories*, Tacitus does not tell his audience exactly how Galba became emperor. Because he opens his narrative on January 1 in the annalistic tradition,¹ Galba already holds *imperium*, but he experiences a severe decline in his authority. Tacitus does not tell his audience this directly until 1.12.1 (when he begins the narrative proper), but he continually hints at Galba's gradual failure throughout his introduction. Chapter 2 lists the horrors and instability of the empire, and even reveals *quattuor principes ferro interempti*, a statement blatantly foreshadowing Galba's death.² Chapter 5 portrays the army as *pronus ad novas res*, and the prefect Nymphidius Sabinus as eager for *imperium*. Chapter 6 further implies Galba's ruin by introducing Titus Vinius and Cornelius Laco as the men who caused his destruction. Indeed, these first eleven chapters are sewn thick with the seeds of Galba's downfall, and chapter 12 reveals the result of his unpopularity. Shortly after January 1, the legions of Upper Germany disregard their oath to Galba and demand a different emperor. This is how Tacitus' narrative proper begins, "when Galba's fortunes are already on the decline" (Ash 1999.76), so we do not see him seize power firsthand in the *Histories*. Instead we are left one clue at 1.15.1. In his speech to Piso, Galba only mentions that he gained the principate in war (*principatum... bello adeptus*), but no details are provided. Thus the *Histories* do not narrate Galba's rise into power, but reveal everything concerning his fall.

¹ Damon points out Tacitus' choice of the annalistic starting point "in preference to Nero's suicide or the beginning of Galba's principate" (2003.78). Syme calls Tacitus' decision "vital and inevitable," as traveling back to Nero's end or Galba's beginning would require Tacitus to fill in a wealth of background information, whereas jumping ahead and making a start somewhere else in the year 69 would cut out too many important events (1958.145).

² I use Damon's text of *Histories* 1 and Ash's text of *Histories* 2 throughout this thesis; all translations are my own.

How Does Galba Strive to Maintain Authority?

As his downfall occurs, Galba vainly attempts to maintain authority through a character trait and a legal mechanism, namely his old-fashioned strictness (*severitas*) and his adoption of Piso. When Galba is first characterized at 1.5, Tacitus writes that his *severitas* was once praised and much talked about among the soldiers (*laudata olim et militare fama celebrate severitas eius*).³ Galba does not realize that times have changed and his tight grip now causes aggravation (*angebatur aspernantem veterem disciplinam*, 1.5.2). Throughout the first 49 chapters of the *Histories*, repeated references to *severitas* establish Galba's harshness as one of his main character flaws. At 1.14.2, Piso is described as being a pleasing candidate for adoption because, much like Galba himself, Piso was a man of the old customs in appearance and demeanor, stern, and quite gloomy (*vultu habituque moris antiqui et aestimatione recta severus, ... tristior*). The next two chapters echo these traits as Galba advises Piso towards temperance (*secundae res... animos explorant... inrunpet adulatione, blanditiae et pessimum veri adfectus venenum, sua cuique utilitas*, 1.15.2; *sit ante oculos Nero... sua immanitas, sua luxuria cervicibus publicis depulerunt*, 1.16.1). Galba's speech teems with such a strong concern for sobriety to no purpose. Tacitus follows this speech with another description of Piso, a mirror image of the portrait given three chapters earlier. Piso is *reverens, moderatus*, and there is no change in his appearance or demeanor (*nihil in vultu habituque mutatum*, 1.17.1).

This emphasis on *severitas* over the course of four chapters serves to label Galba and his heir as overtly strict, and just in time for Galba's speech to the troops (1.18), when Tacitus narrates Galba's coldest, most stern moment. Restricting the speech to a single chapter, Tacitus writes with the same brevity used by Galba himself (*imperatoria brevitate... pronuntiat*). The

³ Damon's suggestion is used to translate *militari fama celebrata* as 'much talked about among the soldiers', since it handles the ablative of means *fama* with minimal clumsiness (2003.106).

indirect speech feels dull and impersonal. Galba only offers the crowd what is necessary (*nec ullum orationi aut lenocinium addit aut pretium*, 1.18.2), and so loses their attention and loyalty. “He was plain and curt, disdaining any effort to win their sympathies” (Syme 1958.152). The end of this chapter (1.18.3) illustrates Galba’s gloominess reflected onto his troops (*per ceteros maestitia ac silentum*), completed by a foreshadowing of its result, Galba’s downfall (*nocuit antiquus rigor et nimia severitas*). Thus, this very *severitas* will be a primary cause of Galba’s ruin (Damon 2003.105), although he ironically tries to wield it as an authoritative tool. Even when surrounded by so much danger and uncertainty, Galba feigns control by asking Otho’s alleged murderer who gave him his orders (*inquit, “quis iussit?” insigni animo ad coercendam militarem licentiam*, 1.35.2). Ash speculates “perhaps Galba thought that a tough persona was just as instrumental in gaining support as his stance as a liberator” (1999.76). Yet in this instance, the very thing that is supposed to gain authority, *severitas*, serves as a challenge to that authority.

Perhaps a more successful means of gaining authority rested with Piso. Galba certainly recognizes his opportunity to regain favor through a wise adoption, and this is the first move he makes when he hears of the mutiny in Upper Germany (1.12.1). Galba’s speech clearly shows his belief that Piso will patch up his precarious situation: “Once people hear about the adoption, I will cease to seem an old man, which now is the only offense against me” (*audita adoptione desinam videri senex, quod nunc mihi unum obicitur*, 1.16.3). Galba does not realize that, if anything, an adoption will make him appear even older. In any case, Piso’s presence as an imperial figure appears restorative at first. He has ability but lacks wicked ambition (*quasi imperare posset magis quam vellet*, 1.17.1), he has grace and the favor of the senate (*Pisonis comis oratio et patrum favor aderat*, 1.19.1), and so he seems to take on an image of authority.

As Haynes points out, however, the senate no longer cares about the state, but only about their own selfish hopes (*paucis iudicium aut rei publicae amor: multi stulta spe*, 1.12.3). “The senators demonstrate a nearly total lack of interest in the adoption in their desire to keep up appearances” (Haynes 2003.43). In spite of this, Piso is repeatedly sent in as a representative of the imperial power. At 1.19, when the senate decides to send a delegation to pacify the mutinous troops in Germany, they debate whether to send Piso, since “he would bear the dignity of a Caesar” (*hic dignationem Caesaris laturus*, 1.19.2). Piso makes no further moves (*nec aliud sequenti quadriduo...dictum a Pisone in publico factumve*, 1.19.1) until Otho’s coup explodes. While Galba hides in the palace with his authority preserved for greater measures (*integra auctoritas maioribus remediis servabatur*, 1.29.1), Piso stands in the line of fire in an attempt to calm the soldiers. Piso is sent to the camp to win back military fidelity, since he was young, from a good family, recently popular, and an enemy to Titus Vinius (*ut iuvenis magno nomine, recenti favore et infensus Tito Vinio*, 1.34.1). Once again timing is not on Piso’s side, because in the camps the intentions of all were no longer questionable (*haud dubiae iam in castris omnium mentes*, 1.36.1). Piso enters too late to establish any solid authority, just as Galba’s decisions had come too late to pacify the troops in the North. Adoption only aggravates the anger and jealousy of the desirous Otho (*in Galbam ira, in Pisonem invidia*, 1.21.1), who sees the delayed act as an opportunity to strike (*proinde agendum audendumque, dum Galbae auctorita fluxa, Pisonis nondum coaluisset*, 1.21.2). Once again, the emperor’s attempt to hold authority causes him to lose it. So it seems that the biggest challenges to unstable authority are the means by which Galba tries to maintain what little authority he has.

What Authority Does Galba Manage to Gain?

Although Galba fails to gain authority through discipline and his adoption of Piso, he is not completely unrecognized as the imperial power. Throughout the *Histories*, Tacitus hints that

even though he was certainly not respected by the common soldiers, Galba held favor in the eyes of several officers. For example, the reception of Galba's speech in the military camp is described as mixed: the tribunes and centurions and those soldiers nearest to him respond with agreeable listening, from the others there was gloominess and silence (*tribuni tamen centurionesque et proximi militum grata auditu respondent: per ceteros maestitia ac silentium*, 1.18.3). In the very next chapter, Tacitus acknowledges a similarity between Galba's words to the troops and his speech to the senate (*inde apud senatum non comptior Galbae, non longior quam apud militem sermo*, 1.19.1), and the reactions Galba receives are also lukewarm. Although favor is generally present (*patrum favor aderat*), some senators react favorably (*multi voluntate*), others are apathetic and comply only because of their own selfish hopes (*medii ac plurimi obvio obsequio, privatas spes agitant*, 1.19.1). From these few sentences it becomes clear that Galba can never secure the fidelity of the whole group. He catches the favor of the high-ranking, but he cannot capture the cares of the dishonorable or the *vulgus*. Similarly, when Piso stands before the palace and speaks against Otho and mutiny, some troops sneak away, some listen (*dilapsis speculatoribus cetera cohors non aspernata contionantem* 1.31.1). Both Galba and Piso have difficulty holding the attention of a crowd.

In this same chapter, three parts of the spectrum are represented: those who hate Galba, those who like him, and those who teeter in the middle. The legion of the marines was not to be trusted since they had been angered by the massacre at Galba's entrance (*infestae ob caedem commilitonum*, 1.31.2). Cetrius Severus, Subrius Dexter, and Pompeius Longinus risk their lives on behalf of Galba and are attacked while going to the camp to avert the mutiny. Longinus was a particular target because of his friendship with Galba (*e Galbae amicis...suscipior*, 1.31.3). Finally, at the end of 1.31, the German detachments waver because they were kindly disposed to

Galba (*placatis animis*) since he took care of them when they returned from Alexandria. Once again, Galba has secured some favor, but incomplete support causes his situation to crumble.

The support Galba does receive, then, comes from individuals who are singled out specifically by Tacitus (for example, Severus, Dexter, and Longinus at 1.31.2). The first and perhaps most important supporter is Vespasian who was in no way adverse to Galba, and in fact he sent Titus to pay respects to him. Later, Tacitus elaborates on this at the beginning of Book 2, and so it seems that his mention at 1.10.3 of Titus' visit is intended primarily to show that Galba was respected by his commander in the East. Much later we find that Galba was also well liked by Caecina (*hunc iuvenum Galba, quaestorem in Baetica impigre in partes suas transgressum, legioni praeposuit*, 1.53.1), until Caecina was charged with embezzling funds. Much nobler are the four centurions whom Tacitus makes sure to name at 1.56.1. Nonius Receptus, Donatius Valens, Romilius Marcellus, and Calpurnius Repentinus, all of the twenty-second legion, were thrown into chains after trying to protect Galba's images from abuse (*cum protegerent Galbae imagines, impetu militum abrepti vinctique*). Damon notes that none of these men are attested elsewhere (2003.217), and so Tacitus' mention of them, especially with such specific identification, lends credibility to their story of faith towards Galba.⁴ A final impressive act of loyalty occurs at 1.71, many chapters after Galba's death. Marius Celsus pleads guilty in front of Otho to fidelity towards Galba. This is a courageous move, since at 1.45.2 the soldiers demanded his punishment because he was a loyal friend to Galba until the end (*Galbae usque in extremas*

⁴ Another noble individual, Sempronius Densus, is named at 1.43. The same *fides* towards the *imperium* can be seen, as Densus holds off assassins long enough for Piso to escape to the Temple of Vesta. Damon notes that in Plutarch and Dio, Densus is protecting Galba, not Piso (2003.186).

res amicum fidumque). In spite of this, Celsus lives on with the esteem of both Otho and the troops.⁵

In addition to the faith of these few individuals, Galba trusts generally in good men, *boni*. He acknowledges this in his speech to Piso when he says: “you and I must see to it that he (Nero) is not missed also by the good” (*mihi ac tibi providendum est ne etiam a bonis desideretur*, 1.16.3).⁶ Unlike those brave men mentioned by name, Tacitus never clearly identifies the *boni*, perhaps because they never follow through with real aid for Galba. Damon writes “The events of 15 January showed that the support of the *boni* on whom Galba relied was of no use to him” (2003.167). At 1.32.2, Vinius (perhaps insidiously) advises Galba to sit in his palace and wait out the mutiny by allowing time for the good to come to a consensus (*daret bonorum consensui spatium*). But Laco and the others recognize the foolishness of this advice and sarcastically reply that there was splendid assistance to be found among the slaves, if the consensus of such a multitude and their first indignation, which is strongest, should slacken (*praeclarum in servis auxilium si consensus tantae multitudinis et, quae plurimum valet, prima indignatio elanguescat*, 1.33.2). Concerning this statement, Damon comments that “In the view of these advisors, the *boni* are neither many nor reliable” (2003.169). Indeed these advisors are right. At 1.33.1 those in favor of action against the mutiny paint a picture of Galba, the *egregius* emperor, besieged in the palace with his courageous friends (*cum fortibus amicis*). Yet no such friends are found once Galba leaves the palace and is suddenly in true danger. Of course the mutiny may never have grown so large if the *boni* had stepped up in the first place. At 1.26.1, Tacitus indicated that the

⁵ Damon points out that Celsus earns the *titulus virtutis* which Otho was trying to achieve for himself in this situation (2003.244). Sincere loyalty wins out in this instance.

⁶ Just before this statement, Galba says that Nero will always be missed by the worst men (*Nero a pessimo quoque semper desiderabitur*, 1.16.3). Then he says that he must see to it that Nero is not missed also by the good. In a way this implies that all of Galba’s concerns are aimed towards pleasing the *boni*, and that he considers the others lost causes. By abandoning them, Galba sets himself up for treachery.

loyal were willing to look the other way (*parata apud malos seditio, etiam apud integros dissimulatio fuit*). At 1.28.1, Julius Martialis, along with other tribunes and centurions, abandons loyalty and feigns complicity in order to protect himself (*anteponere ceteri quoque tribuni centurionesque praesentia dubiis et honestis*). The men change from brave *boni* into the self-concerned majority. All the while Galba believed he held authority with this group, when in fact their loyalty was false.

Flattery caused others to act even more falsely and cowardly. Although Galba is described as impervious to flattery (*adversus blandientis incorruptus, 1.35.2*),⁷ and he explicitly warns Piso of it (*inrumpet adulatio, blanditiae...adsentio erga quemcumque principem sine adfectu peragitur, 1.15.4*), many men still attempt to use it. Even during the danger of Otho's coup, flattery is not forgotten (*ne tum quidem obliti adulationis, 1.29.1*). When the rumor of Otho's death is heard, the people, knights, and senators all give applause (*tum vero non populus tantum et imperita plebs in plausus et immodica studia sed equitum plerique ac senatorum, 1.35.1*). The senators are perhaps most notorious for adulation. At 1.19.1, most of the senators approve Piso's adoption with servility because of their own selfish hopes (*medii ac plurimi obvio obsequio, privatas spes agitantes sine publica cura*). In this same chapter, the senate votes that a delegation be sent to the army in Germany, but asks Galba to choose its members. In actuality, however, the men themselves decide whether to stay or to go, according to their hopes or fears (*ut quemque metus vel spes impulerat, 1.19.2*). Galba exerts no control (*foeda inconstantia, 1.19.2*).

Concerning the *vulgus*, Galba's authority is non-existent. According to Keitel, the sycophancy of the *vulgus* is revealed during the coup: the common people call for Otho's death, but they possessed neither judgment nor truth, since on the same day they would demand the

⁷ Not only does Galba not like to receive flattery, but he refuses to give it, which upsets the soldiers in 1.18.2 (*nec ullum orationi aut lenocinium addit aut pretium*).

opposite with equal enthusiasm (*neque illis iudicium aut veritas, quippe eodem die diversa pari certamine postulaturis*, 1.32.1; 2006.229). Similarly, “the so-called responsible classes” burst into the palace and show equal hypocrisy, being men only of words and not of action (*in periculo non ausurus, nimii verbis, linguae feroces*, 1.35.1; Keitel 2006.230). Again, flattery runs high, and real concern is low. Husband analyzes the indifference shown by the silent multitude at 1.40 and elsewhere, arguing that they did not actively hate Galba, but rather “the citizens had no special fondness for any one of the possible claimants to the throne: *ut non in unum aliquem prono favore, ita audenti parata* (1.6.2; 1915.324). Hated or not, Galba nevertheless was not in good favor with the people.

As Ash reveals in her book *Ordering Anarchy*, the state of Galba’s authority with the troops is even worse. All of Book 1 resonates with the unhappiness of the common soldiers, but some instances are particularly worth mentioning. Tacitus does not reveal until 1.55 that Galba’s *imperium* was disregarded in Germany from the very start. Only some soldiers recite the oath of allegiance on January 1 while the others stand in silence.⁸ Some legions throw stones at Galba’s images while others tear them down. No officers step up to stop these acts of insolence. No respect for authority is found. Yet throughout Book 1 the common soldiery feels that the officers are on Galba’s side. During the coup, as they raise Otho onto a platform, the troops warn each other to be cautious of their commanders (*gregarius miles caveri insuper praepositos iubebat*, 1.36.2). This episode nicely demonstrates that even the ordinary troops knew that Galba’s sole

⁸ The troops accept Galba’s speech at 1.18 in much the same way. Some are responsive while others remain silent.

source of support resided in his officers. It is primarily Galba's failure to secure authority with the common soldiers that causes his destruction.⁹

What Causes Galba's Authority to Become Unstable?

Galba's authority with the soldiers fails due to many factors, many of which are character flaws: *severitas*, the adoption of Piso, the memory of Nero, Galba's old age and greed, the *infaustus* entrance into the city, the trouble brewing because of unfit or power-hungry leaders, and Galba's fickleness and ignorance. Tacitus presents them all at 1.4-11. Damon indicates that these chapters summarize the condition of the empire at the beginning of 69, starting with the after-effects of Nero's death, traveling through "Rome's increasing familiarity with Galba," then describing the state of the provinces. She notes, "As defined by chh. 4-7 the significant elements in the *status urbis* were the attitudes towards Galba in the various groups surveyed and the general instability... These two themes also dominate chh. 8-11." (2003.98). By giving this overview, Tacitus paints a full picture of Galba for his readers which he will expand in his main narrative, and then recap in later chapters. He sets out at 1.4 to explain the emotion felt over the death of Nero, a character who haunts the *Histories* frequently, as Haynes has shown.¹⁰ Nero even creeps briefly into 1.5.1, but then Tacitus returns to Galba. He mentions his failure to reward the soldiers and the attempt of the mutinous Nymphidius, but then Tacitus bombards the reader with Galba's old age, greed, and severity all in a matter of a few lines. The chapter then closes with another comparison with Nero. As if Galba's image has not plummeted enough by these statements, 1.6.1 opens with the words *invalidum* and *senem* describing the emperor.

⁹ Ash points out that the disaffection of the troops towards Galba is passive (they stand in silence during his speech at 1.18) and needs a catalyst (Otho) to become active and violent: "most low-ranking soldiers allow their resentment to smoulder rather than to explode dramatically" (1999.26).

¹⁰ Haynes focuses an entire chapter around Nero's absence in the *Histories*: "Nero's influence is written all over this story, from the public reaction to his death to impersonations of him both by subsequent emperors and by faraway fortune seekers" (2003.34).

Another early reference is made to Galba's ruin as Vinius and Laco are introduced as his destroyers, and then Galba's ill-omened entrance into the city is mentioned. The city is filled with troops (1.6) and executions are ubiquitous (1.7). The provinces are also in turmoil, governed by men who are either weak, or corrupt and hungry for power. Overall there is *ingens materia novis rebus* (1.6.2).

Needless to say, the old fashioned discipline of Galba is not a trait the soldiers experienced with their previous emperor. "By stressing his rigorous methods of military leadership, the new emperor indicates publicly that he will not be another Nero" (Ash 1999.76). Indeed, Galba is in no way a Nero, and this also causes him trouble.¹¹ Before Galba is even officially introduced, Tacitus writes how Nero's death stirs various emotions in the city.¹² Some are elated, but the lowly plebs and slaves are distraught because of their dependence on Nero (*adesis bonis per dedecus Neronis alebantur*, 1.4.3). Next, Tacitus suggests that the soldiers had not abandoned Nero by decision, but rather they were tricked (*ad destituendum Neronem arte magis et impulsu quam suo ingenio traductus*). The troops notice that they have lost some privileges under Galba, which makes them *pronus ad novas res* (1.5.1). Nero appears yet again at the end of this chapter in a comparison of the emperors: although the men had learned to love the vices of Nero, they could not tolerate Galba's rigor (*angebant aspernantis veterem disciplinam atque ita quattuordecim annis a Nerone adsuefactos ut haud minus vitia principum amarent quam olim virtutes verebantur*, 1.5.2). Haynes writes that "together 1.4-5 present the absent Nero as a kind of energy source against which Galba's character and policies will be measured" (2003.46).

Indeed, Nero's name lingers in the text, making two appearances at 1.6, then in another

¹¹ Ash writes, "Galba repeatedly exploited the fruitful contrast between polarized images of republican liberty and imperial tyranny: he himself symbolized the former, while Nero embodied the latter" (1999.74).

¹² Haynes points out that 1.4 was considered by Syme as the beginning of the second preface, and Tacitus "gives his (Nero's) absence an important place as the header of the second preface" (2003.41).

comparison at 1.7.3 between Nero's youth and Galba's old age.¹³ The soldiers were used to a certain kind of emperor, and that is where their fidelity continued to lie. When Otho is introduced at 1.13, he is said to hold favor with the troops and Nero's court because he was like Nero (*faventibus plerisque militum, prona in eum aula Neronis ut similem*, 1.13.4). Yet Galba fails to wield this situation to his advantage. In his speech to Piso, he bashes Nero for his savage character and extravagance (*sua immanitas, sua luxuria*, 1.16.2), along with those who miss Nero's rule (1.16.3). Galba makes a dangerous move by shunning those loyal to Nero.

Galba's old age is also strongly criticized in these early chapters. As mentioned above, many had become accustomed to Nero's youth and good looks, and so Galba's advanced age was quite unappealing (*ipsa aetas Galbae inrisui ac fastidio erat adsuetis iuventae Neronis et imperatores forma ac decore corporis...comparantibus*, 1.7.3). His old age draws attention in the two preceding chapters as well and will echo further into 1.9, 1.12, 1.16, and beyond. Tacitus creates a strand which cannot be missed. At 1.5.2, *senium* is a subject of ridicule among the soldiers (*nec deerant sermones senium atque avaritiam Galbae increpantium*), and *senem* appears as the second word of 1.6.1, next to *invalidum*. To begin a chapter with such a phrase blatantly emphasizes Galba's elderly condition. Because a statement of the emperor's subjection to Vinius and Laco immediately follows, Galba appears even weaker.¹⁴ A remark at 1.12.2 recalls both 1.6 and 1.5 as men gossip about Galba's feeble age (*non sane crebrior tota civitate sermo per illos mensis fuerat...dein fessa iam aetate Galbae*).

In the strongest gesture towards old age, Hordeonius Flaccus (not Galba) is described as *senecta ac debilitate pedum invalidum* (1.9.1). Tacitus seems to take this opportunity to show

¹³ Damon comments that Valens and Caecina will also be compared in terms of age and appearance at 1.52, 1.53, 1.66 (2003.114).

¹⁴ Damon notes that although other sources combine age and physical weakness to describe Galba, "only T. connects Galba's physical state and his choice of associates in explaining his growing unpopularity" (2003.106).

how dangerous old age (like Galba's) can be. Old age is scorned by the soldiers and coupled with a lack of firmness and authority (*sine constantia, sine auctoritate*, 1.9.1). The troops are restless and even agitated by weakness. Ingredients for mutiny seem ripe, and at 1.12.1 Flaccus' legions are revealed as the first to begin *sedition*. No reasons are directly stated, but since Galba reacts by considering adoption, he probably assumed his old age was the cause of the revolt.¹⁵ The speech to Piso confirms that Galba believed the adoption would fix men's attitudes towards his senility, and thus the rebellious situation: *et audita adoptione desinam videri senex, quod nunc mihi unum obicitur* (1.16.3). Indeed, when mutiny breaks out in the city, Galba sends Piso to placate the troops because, among other things, he is young (*praemissus tamen in castra Piso, ut iuuenis*, 1.34.1). Mutiny rages on, and Galba finds his old age promotes his ruin now more than ever. He cannot defend himself as he is raised into a chair (*inruenti turbae neque aetate neque corpore resistens sella levaretur*, 1.35.1), and later helplessly tumbled to the ground (*Galba proiectus e sella ac provolutus est*, 1.41.2).¹⁶ The soldiers rush to kill their emperor *inermem et senem* (1.40.2). Yet ironically, once Galba is dead Tacitus does not mention his old age in his obituary except by noting that he lived 73 years and through the reigns of five emperors (1.49.2). The negative connotation does not appear here. It seems that over the span of these chapters (1.5-1.49), Galba's old age is for a long time scorned, near the end becomes pitiful, and at last, completely free of negative feeling.¹⁷

Greed (*avaritia*) is the third characteristic to be coupled with old age and strictness at 1.5.

Galba does not follow through with the promised donative, and this makes the soldiers *pronus ad*

¹⁵ As stated above, adoption was a hot topic for gossip at this time because of Galba's old age (*crebrior...sermo...fessa iam aetate Galbae*, 1.12).

¹⁶ Tacitus' use of passive verbs here seems to emphasize Galba's powerlessness and lack of control.

¹⁷ Compared to other sources, however, "Tacitus omits details which might undermine Galba's identity as a frail old man" (Ash 1999.78).

novas res when Nymphidius attempts his uprising. Also at 1.5, miserliness is evident in Galba's idealistic motto that he prefers choosing his soldiers to buying them, a motto which is precarious to him (*ipsi anceps*). Already Galba's stinginess has set him up for destruction, but at 1.18 the damage it has caused to the soldier's loyalty becomes obvious. When Galba offers no word of reward (*nec ullum... addit aut pretium*, 1.18.2), and all hope of the donative is lost (*tamquam usurpatam etiam in pace donativi necessitatem bello perdidissent*, 1.18.3), Galba clearly loses their support.¹⁸ Tacitus makes sure his audience realizes the harm of Galba's stinginess by adding that the men could have been won over by the smallest generosity of the frugal old man (*constat potuisse conciliari animos quantulacumque parci senis liberalitate*, 1.18.3). From this point forward the troops are entirely lost to Galba. And perhaps Galba realized his mistake all along, for one version of his last words portrays him pleading for a few days to pay the donative (1.41.2) in a vain effort to regain favor. Galba dies a stingy man, and this characteristic rings most negatively in his obituary (*pecuniae alienae non adpetens, suae parcus, publicae avarus*, 1.49.3).

Although the majority of the soldiery abandons Galba at 1.18 due to his miserliness, many soldiers are lost to Galba right from the start. His entrance into the city is *infaustus* since it is accompanied by the massacre of thousands of defenseless soldiers (1.6.2). This deed will haunt Galba in his time of need, for during the coup he cannot place trust in his *legioni classicae* since it is still hostile about the murder of their comrades (1.31.2). Yet this slaughter is not the only fit

¹⁸ Galba's stinginess not only loses the support of the troops, but also causes trouble away from Rome. At 1.65, because Galba is angry with Lyons, he diverts their money into the imperial treasury.

of violence from Galba. At 1.7 a string of executions is recorded which do not reflect well on Galba (*caedes sinistre accepta*) and serve to intensify his unpopularity.¹⁹

Considering the precarious state of the city and provinces, trouble was bound to occur. At 1.2.1, Tacitus introduces the time period as one abundant with disasters, dreadful with battles, discordant with seditions, and fierce even in peace itself (*opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevum*). Civil and foreign wars were raging, and so the soldiers played a key role in the state of the empire. At Rome there was an unaccustomed military force (*plena urbs exercitu insolito*, 1.6.2) comprised primarily of men assembled by Nero, and this force provided *ingens novis rebus materia* (1.6.2). In the provinces various troublesome situations were developing: Cluvius Rufus in Spain is *bellis inexpertus* (1.8.1), the Gallic people are upset for several reasons (including the removal of Verginius, their commander, to Rome, 1.8.2). Hordeonius Flaccus in Upper Germany is scorned for weakness while Vitellius in Lower Germany is new at his command (1.9.1). Mucianus in Syria holds a notorious reputation, and Vespasian is fighting the Jewish war (1.10.1-3). Egypt prospered once Macer had been executed, but many other regions were influenced by the surrounding powers, while unarmed provinces were subjected and destined to become prizes to the strong (*inermes provinciae atque ipsa in primis Italia, cuicumque servitio exposita, in pretium belli cessurae erant*, 1.11.3). The overall Roman condition was ripe for trouble, and Tacitus clearly confirms this fact. He closes this section of his work with a haunting ominous statement: this year for the state was nearly the last (*annum...rei publicae prope supremum*, 1.11.3).

One reason for the precarious condition of the empire stems from the type of men in control. While some are weak or inexperienced (Cluvius Rufus, Hordeonius Flaccus, and

¹⁹ Ash notes that Tacitus' use of ablative absolutes in the sections concerning the massacre and executions makes it difficult to assign responsibility (1999.77). Galba is not fully at fault.

Vitellius), others are hungry for power. Nymphidius Sabinus, the prefect, attempts to win over the disgruntled soldiers and thus the empire, but is suppressed. Although Tacitus only devotes a few lines to the uprising of Nymphidius,²⁰ its impact and repercussions seem substantial. Even after the source of defection is eliminated, the soldiers remain mindful of their situation and criticism of Galba grows strong (1.5.2). Events related at 1.7 have a similar effect. Clodius Macer, the governor of Africa, and Fonteius Capito, governor of Lower Germany, who had been stirring up trouble in their respective provinces, were executed by fellow officers. Even though Galba had not issued orders for their deaths, they added to his unpopularity (*ceterum utraque caedes sinistre accepta, et in viso semel principi seu bene seu male facta parem invidiam adferebant*, 1.7.2). With such dislike for their current emperor, the soldiers try to raise a new one in Verginius. At 1.8.2, Verginius is said to have slowly abandoned Nero for Galba, perhaps because he had an eye on the *imperium* for himself. It was asserted (*conveniebat*) that his troops offered him power, but he then was recalled to Rome (1.8.2). Yet even there he was encouraged towards *imperium* by legates from the Illyrican legions (1.9.3). Verginius refuses, but he could have caused a mutiny of his own, had he wanted.²¹

Still, of all the men who cause problems for Galba, Titus Vinius and Cornelius Laco top them all. In fact, Tacitus introduces them as Galba's destroyers, Vinius because he was such a despised villain and Laco because he was lazy (1.6.1). For Syme, "Galba was powerless in the hands of his associates, and careless, so it seemed" (1958.150). Galba is portrayed as being subjected to them and forced to bear them as a burden (*odio flagitiorum oneratum contemptu*

²⁰ Damon observes that "T. reduces his (Nymphidius') story to a minimum...Plutarch, by contrast, allots four substantial chapters (G. 8-9, 13-14)"(2003.104).

²¹ Verginius later incurs violence for his refusal of power (2.49, 2.51, 2.68). In 2.68, Tacitus writes that "no one was harassed by every sedition more often than Verginius: admiration and his fame remained, but they hated him because they were rejected by him" (*nec quemquam saepius quam Verginium omnis seditio infestavit: manebat admiratio viri et fama, set oderant ut fastiditi*, 2.68.4). Possible reasons for Verginius' refusal are given in 1.52.

inertiae, 1.6.1). Indeed, Tacitus shows these two standing on the shoulders of Galba and acting as the true power of the empire (*potentia principatus divisa in Titum Vinium consulem Cornelium Laconem praetorii praefectum*, 1.13.1). Along with the freedman Icelus, each fights for the upper hand (1.13.1-2). Laco and Icelus side against Vinus when he nominates Otho (certainly not for selfless reasons) for adoption (1.13.2). When giving advice during the coup against Galba, Laco threatens Vinus when he disagrees with his plan. Icelus eggs them on out of hatred for Vinus (1.33.2). The hostility of Laco against Vinus does not climax until 1.39. Here it is said (*dicitur*) that Laco thought about killing Vinus for various reasons, one of which was simply hate (*agitasse Laco...de occiando Tito Vinio*, 1.39.2). This is perhaps Laco's most active moment in all of the *Histories*. Damon points out moments of deceit (at 1.14.1 Laco feigns unfamiliarity with Piso; at 1.39.2 he plots to kill Vinus *ignaro Galba*), and incompetence (at 1.24.2 Laco fails to notice Otho's ploy; at 1.26.2, Laco makes light of rumors of mutiny; 2003.106-7). His laziness is only hinted at once: at 1.19.2 Laco was to be sent as a legate to Germany, but he backs out. His impact in the *Histories* certainly takes a back seat to that of Vinus, as Tacitus reflects in their death notices. Vinus receives a full obituary coupled with but longer than Piso's. Laco gets a few short lines similar to and followed by that of the freedman Icelus.

Vinus and the hatred against him occur repeatedly in the text. We have already seen Laco's odium toward him, but at 1.12 the hate is more widespread. When all advisors are discussing candidates for adoption, hatred of Vinus plays a role in their decisions. His unpopularity increases daily with his power (*etiam in Titi Vinii odium, qui in dies quanto potentior eodem actu invisior erat*, 1.12.3). The soldiers certainly have a strong dislike for him according to 1.34 and 1.39. In an attempt to pacify the mutinous troops, Piso is sent to the camp

because he is young, has a noble name, has recent favor, and he is an enemy of Vinius (1.34.1).

At 1.39.2, Laco considers killing Vinius not only out of his own malice, but to appease the minds of the soldiers with his punishment (*ut poena eius animos militum mulceret*). There is yet a third reason given for Laco's thought of murder. Vinius was believed to have known about Otho's plot (*consciium Othonis credebat*, 1.39.2). He becomes especially suspect at 1.32.2 when he advises Galba to stay inside the palace during the coup and wait for the mutiny to blow over. Damon comments:

Vinius offers a bland rhetoric of unrealistic plans, inaccurate assessments, facile moral labels, and unlikely projections, all crunched in un-Tacitean parallel clauses. Given Otho's haste, delay was an unpromising alternative. In this whole disingenuous speech, in fact, T. is laying the foundation for his claim that Vinius was already working for Otho. (2003.166)²²

Comments made at Vinius' time of death argue for his involvement in the coup. While being attacked, he yells that Otho had not ordered his death. Tacitus states that this is a confession of complicity (*conscientiam coniurationis confessus est*) because his life and reputation rather imply that he was aware of the evil of which he was a cause (*potius eius vita famaue inclinat, ut conscius sceleris fuerit cuius causa erat*, 1.42.1). Indeed, at 1.48.2-4 Tacitus paints an unfavorable portrait of Vinius' *vita famaue*. He gives details of two counts of despicable behavior (punished by Caligula and Claudius), and caps them off by calling Vinius bold, sly, eager and, as his mind was inclined, corrupt or diligent, with the same vigor (*audax, callidus, promptus et, prout animum intendisset, pravus aut industrius, eadem vi*, 1.48.4).²³

²² Damon gives further evidence for Vinius being on Otho's side: Vinius had originally suggested Otho for adoption (1.13.2), and he "could expect nothing from Piso" since Piso was *infensus* to him (1.34.1)(2003.186).

²³ Damon calls this obituary blander than Piso's (2003.197), but asserts that it "gives a more balanced assessment" of Vinius than previous passages (2003.106). She notes *pravus aut industrius, eadem vi* as, "an abrupt and enigmatic conclusion to the obituary, juxtaposing opposites (depravity ~ industry) and asserting a connection between them (*eadem*)" (2003.198).

With Vinius and Laco calling the shots, Galba and the empire were bound for ruin. Surely the damage would not have been so severe had Galba been more decisive and firm. Galba is not feared, and “fear was traditionally perceived as a protective device for rulers” (Ash 1999.78). Galba gives way to others on several occasions. At 1.7.2, Tacitus hints that Galba has a natural inconsistency (*mobilitate ingenii*) when dealing with the executions of Macer and Capito. Other officers had made important decisions without consulting him, and he permits this behavior. A similar situation occurs at 1.19.2 when Galba is supposed to choose men for the embassy to Germany. He acted with disgraceful fickleness (*foeda inconstantia*) as he allowed men to go or stay as they preferred. Most deadly to Galba was his lack of decisiveness at 1.34.1. After hearing from Vinius and Laco during the coup, he sides with the more attractive (*speciosiora*) advice, the more forceful personality, and picks Laco’s plan. As Galba discovers at 1.39.1, the best plan was the one not taken.

Not only is Galba too infirm when dealing with others, he is *ignarus*. In his speech to Piso, he thinks that his old age is the only offense laid against him, when in fact his charges are numerous (1.16.3). Ash notes that “Galba’s naïve assertion that people only criticize him because he is an old man exemplifies his failure as emperor to respond adequately to public opinion” (1999.79). Galba seems to be blind to his situation, so when he is about to be killed, he is reported to have asked what he had done to deserve such evil (*quid mali meruisset*, 1.41.2). Galba is also blind to the faults of his friends (*si mali forent, usque ad culpam ignarus*, 1.49.3), and they were aware of this fact. At 1.12.3, Galba’s friends feel free to act selfishly because they are dealing with a weak, gullible man (*infirmum et credulum*). Tacitus in fact uses the word *ignarus* three times to describe Galba: once at 1.49.3 mentioned above, once as Laco contemplates killing Vinius (*ignaro Galba*, 1.39.2), and once as the mutiny first begins (*ignarus*

interim Galba, 1.29.1) and Galba is sacrificing. In truth, Galba had plenty of signs that a coup was brewing, yet he ignored them. The turbulent thunder and lightning during his speech to the troops does not discourage Galba, who scorns such omens as chance (*contemptorem talium ut fortuitarum*, 1.18.1). At 1.27.1, the soothsayer speaks of bad omens, approaching treacheries, and a close enemy, but no reaction from Galba is recorded.²⁴ Pagán writes, “Given every sign by the weather and by the sacrifices, he stubbornly proceeds in ignorance of his own impending fate” (2006.204). Even if Galba is so adverse to these types of signs, he still ignores the many indications of mutiny (*multa erumpentis seditionis indicia*) which come to him through rumor, simply because Laco makes light of them (1.26.2). Overall, Galba is constantly clueless about the situation surrounding him.

As we have seen, there is a plethora of reasons why Galba fails to wield imperial authority, and Tacitus weaves signals of Galba’s faults throughout all of Book 1. He also supplies a convenient summary of Galba’s failings in Otho’s speech to the mutinous troops (1.37-8). Otho first speaks of Galba’s bloody entrance into the city (*milia innocentissimorum militum trucidaverit*, 1.37.2), and several executions (including those of Macer, Capito, and Nymphidius, 1.37.3), then he mentions *saevitia*, *avaritia*, and *disciplinam* (1.37.4). Nero makes a haunting appearance, then Icelus and Vinius are accused of their evils. The donative takes the climactic position at 1.37.5 (*donativo quod vobis numquam datur et cotidie exprobratur*). To begin 1.38.1, Otho attacks Piso, the strongest defense Galba had. Finally, Otho recalls the recent bad omens. Tacitus compiles all of Galba’s failure here in two neat, compact chapters, preparing his readers for Galba’s death just ahead (1.41).

²⁴ As we will see in the next Chapter, Otho actually picks up on these omens and uses them to his benefit (1.27.1, 1.38.1).

Galba's obituary is much more forgiving, and Tacitus allows his reader to bid farewell to Galba with pity. "He was happier under the rule of others than in his own" (*alieno imperio felicior quam suo*, 1.49.2), and he was "free from faults, rather than possessing virtues" (*magis extra vitia quam cum virtutibus*, 1.49.2). Indeed Tacitus smooths out Galba's faults here: *avarus* is softened by association with *non adpetens* and *parcus* (1.49.3). Details of his successful early career are inserted, and the negativity of his old age is cleared by coupling *senior* with *iustitia* (1.49.4). Tacitus lets Galba go gently, allowing him to disappear from the *Histories* with the famous line: *maior privato visus dum privatus fuit, et omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset* (1.49.4). With Galba out of the way, Otho begins his own struggle for authority.

CHAPTER 3
THE AUTHORITY OF OTHO

How Did Otho Become Emperor?

Otho of course rose to power through his violent coup against Galba. His means of constructing the coup, however, and gaining enough strength to follow it through, are various and complex. To simplify, Otho acquires *imperium* by being the antithesis of Galba. Otho reaches out to the common soldiery, plots carefully against his opponents, takes heed of omens, offers praise, and permits flattery.

Galba hardly enjoys center stage before his successor appears.¹ During the discussion over adoption, Vinius supports Marcus Otho, while Laco and Icelus prefer anyone but Otho. Vinius, of course, acts out of his own self interest. A friendship already exists between the two, and rumors begin to connect them through marriage, since Otho is a bachelor and Vinius has an unmarried daughter (*et rumoribus nihil silentio transmittentium, quia Vinio vidua filia, caelebs Otho, gener ac socer destinabantur*, 1.13.2). Galba knew of their relationship and took precaution for the state. He knew Otho was like Nero and that “the republic had been transferred from Nero in vain, if it were to be left in the hands of Otho” (*frustra a Nerone translatae si apud Othonem relinqueretur*, 1.13.2).² Tacitus very appropriately uses this compelling sentence to open his character description of Otho, since Otho’s Neronian features will haunt him throughout the *Histories*. In the past Otho had been negligent (*incuriose*), insolent (*petulanter*), and agreeable to Nero by his emulation of sumptuousness (*gratus Neroni aemulatione luxus*, 1.13.3).

¹ The same can be said of Otho. After Galba’s obituary at 1.49, Vitellius comes on the scene at 1.50. As soon as Otho eliminates one opponent, he has to deal with another.

² For once Galba is not so *ignarus* (*neque erat Galbae ignota*, 1.13) about the present situation. He knows Otho is a bad choice, and so moves on to Piso. Ironically, his moment of perception leads to a decision that will hasten his ruin.

Nero thus had entrusted Otho with Poppaea Sabina, even though he knew of Otho's lusts (*apud conscium libidinum*, 1.13.3), and when an affair was suspected between the two, Otho was sent away to Lusitania as governor. He ruled agreeably (*comiter*), but joined Galba's cause at first chance. On Galba's behalf, he was *nec segnis*, but *inter praesentis splendissimus* (1.13.4). Because of his alacrity in supporting Galba, "having immediately conceived a hope of adoption, he grasped at it more fiercely every day" (*spem adoptionis statim conceptam acrius in dies rapiebat*, 1.13.4). Because of his connection with Nero, Otho knew he could count on a majority of the troops and Nero's circle for support (*faventibus plerisque militum, prona in eum aula Neronis ut similem*, 1.13.4). Within this character sketch, Otho moves from being a suggestion on Vinius' lips and a worry on Galba's mind to an imperial threat conceiving his first thought of revolt.

Tacitus allows Otho to linger in the shadows while Galba adopts Piso. When Otho reemerges, he dominates every chapter thereafter. Throughout 1.21-6 Tacitus focuses on the origins of Otho's coup (Damon 2003.126), using 1.21 specifically to introduce the repercussions of the adoption and "Otho's personal motivations" (Damon 2003.147). Again Otho changes, this time from anxiously considering a plot against the emperor to boldly convincing himself of his need to betray Galba. He knows he cannot benefit from an orderly situation (*cui compositis rebus nulla spes*, 1.21.1), nor from Piso, who is "fierce by nature and savage from his long exile" (*ingenio trucem et longo exilio efferatum*, 1.21.1). His hate for the young heir and the old man grows (*in Galbam ira, in Pisonem invidia*, 1.21.1), as well as his fears of another exile. He concludes that "he should be bold and act, while Galba's authority was frail and Piso's had not yet coalesced" (*proinde agendum audendumque, dum Galbae auctoritas fluxa, Pisonis nondum coaluisset*, 1.21.2). His worries of death motivate him perhaps the most, and this chapter ends

with grim meditations: “Death by nature is equal for everyone...it is the duty of a more vigorous man to deserve to die” (*mortem omnibus ex natura aequalem...acrioris viri esse merito perire*, 1.21.2).³

With Otho’s thoughts seething with revolt, his associates add their own encouragement at 1.22. Otho consults with some very lowly characters, namely his freedmen and slaves, who “acted more corruptly than was suitable in a private home” (*corruptius quam in privato domo habiti*, 1.22.1), and astrologers, “a group of men untrustworthy to the powerful, deceitful to the hopeful, which will always be both forbidden and retained in our city” (*genus hominum potentibus infidum, sperantibus fallax, quod in civitate nostra et vetabitur semper et retinebitur*, 1.22.1). The former tempt Otho with Nero’s extravagant lifestyle, “displaying them as his own” (*ut sua ostentantes*, 1.22.1). Indeed, Otho’s excessive lifestyle is described as “oppressive even for an emperor, hardly to be endured with the need of a private citizen” (*etiam principi onerosa, inopia vix privato toleranda*, 1.21.1). Otho needs to gain the imperial purse if he is to satisfy his desires and truly live up to Nero’s lifestyle. The astrologers feed his hunger for power by assuring him of favorable omens (*novos motus et clarum Othoni annum observatione siderum adfirmant*, 1.22.1). One particular astrologer named Ptolemy directly foretells his rise to emperorship (*persuaserat fore ut in imperium adscisceretur*, 1.22.2) and Otho fully believes him (*Otho tamquam peritia et monitu fatorum praedicta accipiebat*, 1.22.3). Again, Otho is the antithesis of Galba. While Galba believes too little in omens, Otho believes too much. Both are victims of their excess. With support from such vile characters, Otho is ready to plan a coup.

³ Damon points out that compared to other sources, “T. alone has the internal deliberations with which Otho goads himself to his *flagitiosissimum facinus* (ch. 21; cf. 2.50.1) and the moral censure for Otho’s associates (ch. 22)” (2003.148).

Tacitus devotes the next four chapters to describing how Otho prepares for the coup. His main strategy is mentioned at the beginning of 1.23: Otho tries to win popularity with the soldiers (*studia militum...adfectaverat*). He makes appearances in front of the soldiers (*in itinere, in agmine, in stationibus*), engages in camaraderie with some (*vetustissimum quemque militum nomine vocans ac memoria Neroniani comitatus contubernalis appellando*), offers others financial help (*pecunia aut gratia iuvare*), and spreads discontentment against Galba by dropping his own complains about him (*inserendo saepius querelas et ambiguos de Galba sermones quaeque alia turbamenta vulgi*, 1.23.1). The soldiers themselves are tired and complain of long marches, sparse supplies, and harsh discipline (1.23.2).

The next chapter makes their aggravation blatantly apparent (*flagrantibus iam militum animis*, 1.24.1), and the time is ripe for Maevius Pudens to act on their grievances on Otho's behalf. Otho and Pudens especially seek out those fickle by nature, in need of money, or geared towards disturbances (*mobilissimum quemque ingenio aut pecuniae indigum et in novas cupiditates praecipitem*, 1.24.1); however, those in need of money seem to be the prime target. Otho has Pudens distribute money to men on guard (*cohorti excubias agenti viritim centenos nummos divideret*, 1.24.1) as well as secret gifts (*secretoribus apud singulos praemiis*, 1.24.2). A specific example is even given: Cocceius Proculus was disputing property boundaries with his neighbor, so Otho bought the neighbor's property and gave it over to Proculus (1.24.2).⁴

The next chapter continues in the same vein. Otho depends on another man, Onomastus, to work his crime. He seeks out men who are *callidi* and *audaces* (Barbuius Proculus and Veturius) and gives them rewards, promises and money (*pretio et promissis onerat, data pecunia*, 1.25.1). In the second half of 1.25, Otho's plot expands drastically. Some are tempted

⁴ Damon notes that bribes towards praetorians were rare (2003.153), but for Otho they seem numerous and generous.

by the money, while others are stirred to fear by mention of their previous association with Nymphidius, to anger about the missing donative, to a longing for Nero and their earlier license, and to anxiety about a possible change of service. Few are admitted into knowledge of the deed, (*in conscientiam facinoris pauci asciti*, 1.25.2) but many are roused to restlessness.

At this point, all the characters driving Otho's plot are lowly. In addition to the freedmen, slaves, and astrologers from 1.22, Mavius Pudens is a friend of the notorious Tigellinus (*e proximis Tigellini*, 1.24.1), and Onomastus is a freedman. Barbius and Veturius, "two common soldiers" (*duo manipulares*, 1.25.1) are given the most credit, since Tacitus attributes the transfer of *imperium* to them (*suscepere duo manipulares imperium populi Romani transferendum et transtulerunt*, 1.25.1). Other soldiers become involved through bribery or fear. Damon raises an interesting point by asking which soldiers are particularly being targeted by Otho: "Throughout chh.23-5 Otho seems to be dealing with praetorians...but no source includes praetorians on Galba's march to Rome" (2003.152). Tacitus does not specify, but leaves the impression that these are just ordinary troops, average men who are worried about money and their jobs as soldiers. These men, together with the vile characters above, cause Otho to win *imperium*. They are the very men that Galba neglected, and by winning them over, Otho secures power.

Tacitus *does* specify additional targets of the treacherous infection (*tabes*): the legions and auxiliaries are put on edge by Otho's plotting and by news of revolt in Germany. With so much restlessness in the city, sedition now seems probable in Rome. Tacitus writes "indeed rebellion was ready among the wicked, and there was dissimulation even among the loyal" (*adeoque parata apud malos seditio, etiam apud interos dissimulatio fuit*, 1.26.1). Otho would have been raised to *imperium* on January 14, but various factors delayed the plot. It is feared that in the night the troops might mistake the wrong man for Otho, since many do not know him

(*ignorantibus plerisque*), and the men were drinking (*nec facilem inter temulentos consensum*, 1.26.1). This reinforces the thought that Otho was to be hailed as emperor by a flock of ordinary soldiers. Because of general disorganization, the revolt is postponed to January 15.

According to Damon, “the beginning of Galba’s end” starts at 1.27 (2003.156). Otho, who earlier placed so much hope in his astrologers, now considers Galba’s bad omens as favorable omens for himself (*Othone...idque ut laetum e contrario et suis cogitationibus prosperum interpretante*, 1.27.1). After Onomastus arrives at his side, Otho slyly excuses himself from Galba’s presence, and near the temple of Saturn is hailed as emperor by a scant twenty-three *speculatores*. Even Otho himself is startled by the small number (*paucitate salutantium trepidum*, 1.27.2), but others join the party as it moves. Again, some share in the plot (*alii conscientia*), but many join the revolt out of awe (*plerique miraculo*), a phenomenon which greatly aided the success of the revolt (1.27.2). Even officers are swayed by their fear, as exemplified at 1.28. Julius Martialis, a tribune, is so terrified that he feigns complicity (*praebuit plerisque suspicionem conscientiae*, 1.28.1). Other tribunes and centurions also prefer to join the mutiny instead of following honor (*anteponere...praesentia dubiis et honestis*, 1.28.1). Otho’s tiny twenty three-man coup quickly snowballs into a full-blown rebellion, primarily because of fear. Tacitus writes: “such was the state of their minds that a few dared the vilest deed, many desired it, but everyone permitted it” (*isque habitus animorum fuit ut pessimum facinus auderent pauci, plures vellent, omnes paterentur*, 1.28.1).

Otho briefly leaves center stage as Tacitus records the reactions of Galba and Piso to this coup, but Otho returns again at 1.36.1. The feelings of the troops are no longer in doubt (*haud dubiae iam in castris omnium mentes*); they change from anxious to certain. Now that Otho has Rome’s attention, he has to find a way to hold it. He does this through flattery and praise. He is

the antithesis of Galba and gives the soldiers what they have long been craving: attention. A statue of Galba is knocked down as the troops raise Otho onto its platform. Once again, Otho's main support comes from the common soldiery (*gregarius miles caveri insuper praepositos iubebat*, 1.36.2).⁵ Their enthusiasm is great, unlike the sluggish fawning usually given by the *populus* (*non tamquam in populo ac plebe, variis segni adulatione vocibus*, 1.36.2), the soldiers celebrate whole-heartedly, embracing and repeating the oath. Otho encourages their spirit: "stretching out his hands to pay homage to the crowd, to throw kisses and to play the slave in every way for domination" (*protendens manus adorare vulgum, iacere oscula et omnia serviliter pro dominatione*, 1.36.3). The flattery of commander and soldier reflect each other, and Tacitus emphasizes the mutuality. He leads the excitement with the phrase *exhortatione mutua*,⁶ then writes "they commend now the emperor to the soldiers, now the soldiers to the emperor" (*modo imperatorem militibus, modo milites imperatori commendare*, 1.36.2). Otho has taken a spark of enthusiasm from the soldiers and turned it into an inferno by feeding in his own flattery.

The excitement culminates with Otho's speech that recapitulates his rise to power. He associates with the soldiers, slanders Galba, and offers praise. Otho opens by pointing out that both he and the troops have an uncertain status: they may be enemies of the state. Then he says, "indeed, it is clear that we can neither die nor be safe except together" (*adeo manifestum est neque perire nos neque salvos esse nisi una posse*, 1.37.2). Having tightly bonded himself to the soldiers, he reveals Galba's rift with them by recalling the soldiers murdered upon Galba's entrance to the city. Otho then proceeds to list each of Galba's mistakes: the officers he executed,

⁵ Although the tribunes and centurions in fear gave up their loyalty to Galba at 1.28, the common soldiers recall the support the officers showed Galba at 1.18, and therefore do not trust their loyalty to Otho. Damon discusses this, and adds that the use of *iubebat* here suggests the "soldiers were now acting the commander's part" (2003.174). Roles are reversed in the chaos of the coup.

⁶ Of this phrase, Damon writes, "these soldiers, instead of being exhorted by their leader, are exhorting one another, another indication that they have taken command of the situation" (2003.175).

his harsh discipline and greed, his villainous associates Icelus and Vinius, the missing donative, his hopeless adoption with a stern heir, and the ill omens which signified it. In case the listeners are not yet convinced of their choice of emperor, Otho seals the deal with more encouragement. They must support him, for the senate and the people agree, and their strength is expected (*idem senatus, idem populi Romani animus est: vestra virtus expectatur*, 1.38.1). He assures them that his men are detaining Galba, and once they act, their deed will be praised. In a chaotic rush, the common soldiery again makes the move and throws off all command: “with none of the tribunes or centurions exhorting, each man was the leader and commander for himself” (*nullo tribunorum centurionumve adhortante, sibi quisque dux et instigator*, 1.38.3).

Galba, of course, is killed shortly thereafter by the violent crowd of angry soldiers. This is how Otho becomes emperor.

How Does Otho Strive to Maintain Authority?

Having gained *imperium*, Otho needs to find a way to maintain it. He must solidify his authority as soon as possible. Although Galba is dead, Otho realizes that he is not yet in control. At 1.45.2, the crowd is still restless and eager from the coup, and as they demand death for Marcus Celsus, Otho knows “the authority to prohibit the crime was not yet Otho’s” (*Othoni nondum auctoritas inerat ad prohibendum scelus*). So instead he plays along with the mob and proclaims that Celsus will be punished. Immediately after recounting this incident, Tacitus begins 1.46 by writing “everything thereafter was done by the *arbitratio* of the soldiers” (*omnia dein arbitrio militum acta*). Indeed, the *gregarius miles* demand change concerning *vacationes*, and Otho sees to their satisfaction (1.46.2). According to Ash, “unlike Galba, Otho is a product of his times and knows how to win over his soldiers by a variety of methods, including bribery” (1999.30). He had obtained *imperium* by pleasing the ordinary soldier, and their happiness with him would have to continue if he wanted to keep it.

It is therefore surprising that Otho's generosity is not more frequently attested. His openhandedness is mentioned only five times, and on most of these occasions his gifts are just empty gestures. As we have seen, 1.46 records his handling of *vacationes* for the common soldiers, and Otho handles the situation in a way which is equally beneficial for the centurions. His next gesture towards the troops does not occur until 1.82, after the mutiny at the palace. Perhaps this gift would have never been given had it not been for the soldiery's violent mistake. Otho knows he needs to dispense money if he is to enter the camp and set things right again (*quinta milia nummum singulis militibus numerarentur: tum Otho ingredi castra ausus*, 1.82.3). After this, Otho's next and final major donation to the troops comes at 1.90, the very last chapter of Book 1. Before leaving Rome for war with Vitellius, "to all senators who had been exiled under Nero and restored under Galba he gave back as much of each man's property as he found unsold" (Damon 2003.288). However, although the gesture looked generous, it was in fact useless (*iustissimum donum et in speciem magnificum, sed festinata iam pridem exactione usu sterile*, 1.90.1).

The only other generosity worth mentioning is not directed at the soldiers at all. At 1.77, Otho distributes some offices to some old men and youths, and restores a few others to senatorial rank. Following these deeds, Otho attempts to win over the provinces *eadem largitione*. He sends more people to some colonies, he gives out citizenship, and he constructs some new constitutions, but Tacitus remarks that these were meant more for display than for lasting results (*ostentata magis quam mansura*, 1.78.1).

Otho is, however, generous with his words. As we have seen already in the forum scene at 1.36, Otho loves to give and receive flattery and praise. His speech at 1.83-4 reeks of it. He begins:

neque adfectus vestros in amorem mei accenderem, commilitones, neque ut animum ad virtutem cohortaret (utraque enim egregie supersunt), sed veni postulaturus a vobis

temperamentum vestrae fortitudinis et erga me modum caritatis...nimia pietas vestra acrius quam considerate excitavit. (1.83.2)

I have not come so that I might incite your affections into love for me, comrades, nor so that I might rouse your spirit to virtue (for both attributes exist in remarkable abundance), but I have come to request from you moderation of your courage and a limit of your love towards me...your excessive loyalty stirred you to act fiercely rather than cautiously.

Where one might expect Otho to admonish the troops for their mutinous conduct, he instead thanks them for excessive virtue. His entire speech employs a gentle tone, and by the end he directs favor also towards the senate. Otho “concludes with exaggerated rhetoric about the value of one of his party’s assets, the senate” (Damon 2003.266-7). He recalls the body’s noble beginnings from the founding and its continuity through the kings and into the principate, and then adds “just as senators originate from you, thus emperors originate from senators” (*ut ex vobis senatores, ita ex senatoribus principes nascuntur*, 1.84.4). Praise of this aspect of the Roman system seems quite unnecessary given the true purpose of the speech, and Damon points out “the irrelevance of the senate to a power struggle based on military might” (2003.267). No one seems to mind, and the *oratio* is *grate accepta* (1.85.1).

The senate knows to return the favor to Otho, and at 1.85.3 they acknowledge that Otho recognizes flattery (*privato Othoni nuper atque eadem dicenti nota adulatio*). They speak little of their true thoughts, but instead alter their words according to the moment, twisting and turning their opinions this way and that. Their behavior at 1.47.1 is similar if not worse. With Otho fresh to the principate, magistrates contend with flattery (*certant adulationibus ceteri magistratus, adcurrunt patres*), and Otho is granted his list of titles. With flattery playing a large role in their communication, Otho’s relationship with the senate is certainly not healthy for the state.

Nevertheless, the emperor who gives flattery receives it in return, however false it may be. Crowds tend to reflect the emotion offered to them.⁷ Preparing to leave Rome, Otho “extols the majesty of the city and the unanimity of the people and senate on his behalf” (*maiestatem urbis et consensum populi ac senatus pro se attollens*, 1.90.2). The response of praise is magnified many times over, but is entirely fake:

clamor vocesque vulgi ex more adulandi nimiae et falsae: quasi dictatorem Caesarem aut imperatorem Augustum prosequerentur, ita studiis votisque certabant, nec metu nec amore, sed ex libidine servitii: ut in familiis, privata cuique stimulatio, et vile iam decus publicum. (1.90.3)

The shouts and voices of the crowd were excessive and false out of habit for flattering: just as if they were following the dictator Caesar or the emperor Augustus, thus they contended with enthusiasm and vows, not out of fear or love, but out of their desire of servitude: as in a household of slaves, for each man the motivation was private, and now the public honor was cheap.

This closing statement no doubt causes the reader to shudder at the condition of Otho’s reign so far, and dread what lies ahead in Book 2. His authority may appear to sit steady for now, but it is built on a foundation of twigs.

What Authority *Does* Otho Manage to Gain?

Perhaps Otho’s association with Nero earns him a bit more authority. Upon his first appearance in the text at 1.13, his ties to Nero are made absolutely clear. Both were extravagant, lustful creatures. Otho uses this similarity to win over the people. Nero was missed and still dear to some (1.4-8), so Otho tries to make his rise to power resemble a return of Nero.⁸ At 1.78.2, “it was believed that he even thought about celebrating the memory of Nero with the hope of

⁷ Note also that when Galba gives a dry, impersonal speech to the troops at 1.18, he gets only some cheers, but many blank, silent stares.

⁸ Indeed, at 1.76, one of Nero’s freedmen in Africa celebrates as if his old master had come back to life to rule Rome once again.

winning over the multitude” (*creditus est etiam de celebranda Neronis memoria agitavisse spe vulgum adliciendi*). He had statues of Poppaea raised by decree of the senate, and some raised statues of Nero as well. The soldiers eventually began to call him Nero Otho on certain days. It seems this may have been more than Otho bargained for, as “he himself held this in uncertainty, out of fear of rejecting it or the shame of acknowledging it” (*ipse in suspenso tenuit, vetandi metu vel agnoscendi pudore*, 1.78.2). As Haynes points out, “Otho...will allow his Neronian features to be recognized, but only passively...he recognizes the strength he derives from allowing himself to be molded by public desire” (2003.46-7). He only hopes that this association will not backfire. Nero was notorious for his extravagances, and several times Otho’s lust for luxury generates fear and negativity (1.50, 1.71, 2.31). This observation could be dangerous, so “Otho has to evoke Nero without having anything to do with Nero” (Haynes 2003.56). He seems to have struck the balance: by 2.11.1, soldiers who had been loyal to Nero transfer their devotion over to Otho during the war.

In what initially seems like one of his digressions, however, Tacitus tells about a false Nero who arose in Achaia and Asia and began gathering followers. Many were aroused by the famous name coupled with their desire for revolt and their hate of the present situation (2.8.2). The fact that this fellow gained more fame day by day (*gliscentem in dies famam*, 2.8.2) may attest to the charm Nero’s repute still had over the people. Yet Ash demonstrates that this episode “captures the uncertainty of the times” and “shows how easily new challengers could be disgorged at any time around the empire” (2007.96). In this respect, Otho’s authority appears unstable and vulnerable even to the meanest pretenders.

Otho establishes authority best when forging political alliances. He seeks out men who can secure favor for him, and uses them accordingly. He recognizes Marcus Celsus as an opportunity

to show clemency, so he reconciles with him, keeps him among his friends, and eventually places him among his leaders. Celsus not only offers Otho loyalty, but he garners favor from the chief men of the state, the multitude, and the soldiers (1.71.3). Otho uses Verginius in a similar way. He grants him the consulship for a few months “to provide some consolation to the German army” (*ut aliquod exercitui Germanico delenimentum*, 1.77.2). Indeed, it was not uncommon for him to use popular figures and political alliances to secure peoples and regions. For example, the distant provinces remain loyal to Otho not because of enthusiasm for him, but because the city and senate are on his side (1.76.2). Vespasian and Mucianus keep the East in allegiance to Otho, and Carthage leads Africa in fidelity towards him (1.76.2-3). Perhaps the most egregious example of Otho’s habit of using others for his own benefit occurs at 1.79. When the Roman soldiers successfully defeat the troublesome Rhoxolani, Otho happily rewards the governor and commanders, but also sees a chance to glorify himself (*laeto Othone et gloriam in se trahente tamquam et ipse felix bello*, 1.79.5).

Otho’s stability does not rest entirely on the shoulders of others. At times, Tacitus admits his ability to keep imperial order is adequate. He puts aside his lustful behavior and handles all matters with the propriety of the imperial office (*dilatae voluptates, dissimulta luxuria et cuncta ad decorem imperii composita*, 1.71.1). Yet his capacity to behave in such a way surprises everyone (*contra spem omnium*), and causes them only to fear the eventual reemergence of his vices (*eoque plus formidinis adferebant falsae virtutes et vitia reditura*, 1.71.1). A similar glimmer of imperial responsibility tainted with dishonor appears at 1.77: “Otho attended to the imperial duties as if in much peace, some things being done outside of the dignity of the state, and many things being done against decorum by hurrying on out of present need” (*Otho ut in multa pace munia imperii obibat, quaedam ex dignitate rei publicae, pleraque contra decus ex*

praesenti usu properando, 1.77.1). Otho gains some authority, but still falters in keeping adequate control of the *imperium*.

What Causes Otho's Authority to Become Unstable?

Thus far we have seen a few minor warning signs of unstable authority: Otho has a lust for luxury which sometimes distracts him and worries the state; he caters to his soldiers' every wish; he engages in false flattery and accepts it in return. What really causes Otho's authority to become unstable is a broken hierarchy of command. The soldiers excessively admire Otho, but they distrust his officers. Ash aptly asserts, "Otho will stir such loyalty amongst his troops that intermediate commanders will have enormous trouble asserting their authority" (1999.93). Ultimately, Otho falls victim to a dysfunctional chain of command.

Otho's authority remains relatively intact until 1.80, when he experiences his first major upset. A simple misunderstanding turns into a mutiny that nearly destroys the city (*orta seditio prope urbi excidio fuit*, 1.80.1). Varius Crispinus, a praetorian tribune, begins loading weapons from the armory into wagons to prepare the seventeenth cohort for a move from Ostia to the city. Because he decides to do this at night, the soldiers suspect him of treachery and begin an uproar. Drunk and eager for their weapons (*inter temulentos arma cupidinem sui movere*, 1.80.1), the soldiers get out of hand and begin to make accusations: the tribunes and centurions are charged with betrayal, and the senators are accused of making an attempt on Otho's life (1.80.2). The soldiers are motivated by ignorance, drunkenness, the desire to loot, and readiness for revolt (*pars ignari et vino graves, pessimus quisque in occasionem praedarum, vulgus, ut mos est, cuiuscumque motus novi cupidum*, 1.80.2). Their distrust of the officers is clear: they kill a tribune and centurion, then hurry off to the Palatine. As Ash points out, "the Othonians are prepared to by-pass their superiors violently in favor of direct contact with their emperor:

already, the command structure has broken down in a dangerous and perhaps irreversible way” (1999.30). With this mutiny, Otho’s hierarchy problems begin.

With the soldiers on the rampage, the nobility and officers abandon Otho in his time of need. The troops break into the palace during a banquet and the guests contemplate flight. They are revealed as cowards (*modo constantiam simulare, modo formidine detegi*, 1.81.1), and watching Otho’s face they are struck with fear (*simul Othonis vultum intueri...timebatur*, 1.81.1). The magistrates throw away their insignias (*magistratus proiectis insignibus*, 1.81.2), flee throughout the city, and hide in the most obscure places possible.

A few men stand their ground but are injured in the onrush (1.82.1). The soldiers demand to see Otho, and his appeals instantly end the *sedition*. Yet Otho is in no way authoritative or dignified, and he has to stand on his couch in tears and beg his soldiers to stop (1.82.1). Tacitus conveys the swiftness of their response to his entreaties by reporting in the same sentence their return to the camp.

The various reactions to this mutiny reinforce the characters of each group: the people hide in their homes, the soldiers are ashamed for their behavior, Otho timidly enters the camp only after money is promised, and the leading men again abandon Otho by tearing away their insignias and denouncing their positions. The soldiers act on their own accord and demand punishment for the *auctores seditionis*.

To handle the situation, Otho attempts to exert his authority through another speech to his soldiers. It is stated directly at 1.83.1 that Otho’s power resided in solicitation (*plures...ambtioso imperio laeti*). Before beginning his speech, Otho ponders about his *imperium* and how to maintain it: “it is not possible to retain a principate sought through wickedness with sudden discipline and outdated gravity” (*non posse principatum scelere quaesitum subita modesta et*

prisca gravitate retineri, 1.83.1). For Manolaraki this meditation is critical: Otho knows that he himself engaged in mutiny in order to gain power, and to a certain extent his civil war with Vitellius can be considered mutiny as well. “Otho is himself just such a mutineer as those he is now attempting to control” (2003.66). Therefore, in tone and demeanor he must walk a fine line. Damon notes, “Otho won’t make Galba’s mistake of attempting to impose an old-fashioned virtue” (226), but to his detriment, he falls to the opposite extreme. He praises the troops for their excessive loyalty to him, and in the end he only punishes a few men (*paucorum culpa fuit, duorum poena erit*, 1.84.2; *neque enim in pluris quam in duos animadverti iusserat*, 1.85.1). He tells the soldiers not to question their superiors and to simply follow orders: “the authority of the leaders and the rigor of discipline maintains itself such, that often it is expedient even for centurions and tribunes only to take orders. If it is permitted for individuals to ask why they are ordered, once obedience is destroyed, command also perishes” (*ita se ducum auctoritas, sic rigor disciplinae habet, ut multa etiam centuriones tribunosque tantum iuberi expediat. Si cur iubeantur quaerere singulis liceat, pereunte obsequio etiam imperium intercidit*, 1.83.3). Otho really harps on this subject, and he makes a similar comment later in this same speech: “military matters are upheld by obedience, comrades, rather than by questioning the commands of the leaders, and the army which is the most orderly before a crisis is strongest in the crisis itself” (*parendo potius, commilitones, quam imperia ducum sciscitando res militares continentur, et fortissimus in ipso discrimine exercitus est qui ante discrimen quietissimus*, 1.84.2). Concerning the overall effects of the speech, Damon comments, “Otho’s words ring hollow because of their failure to reflect the inevitable collapse of discipline” (2003.267). Whereas Otho successfully uses a speech at 1.37-8 to gain authority, the speech meant to maintain it utterly fails. Otho may see the weakness in his *imperium*, but he cannot prevent it from destroying his authority.

Otho's speech acts only as a temporary fix, and as Book 1 comes to a close, the city is restless (*oratio apta ad perstringendos mulcendosque militum animos...compositique ad praesens qui coerceri non poterant. non tamen quies urbi redierat*, 1.85.1). The soldiers continue to suspect their superiors (*maligna cura in omnis, quos nobilitas aut opes aut aliqua insignis claritudo rumoribus obiecerat*, 1.85.1), and the senate continues its flattery (1.85.3). Most importantly, Otho begins to share his authority with some unsavory characters. Although he appoints good men like Suetonius Paulinus, Marius Celsus, and Annius Gallus as commanders, most of his trust is placed in Licinius Proculus, prefect of the praetorian guard (*plurima fides Licinio Proculo*, 1.87.2). This sly fellow slanders his colleagues to gain importance for himself: "He was energetic with the city soldiery, but unaccustomed to war, and by accusing the qualities of each, the authority of Paulinus, the vigor of Celsus, and the experience of Gallus, he did what was quite easy to do: as the small, clever man he surpassed the good and modest men" (*is urbanae militiae impiger, bellorum insolens, auctoritatem Paulini, vigorem Celsi, maturitatem Galli, ut cuique erat, criminando, quod facillimum factu est, parvus et callidus bonos et modestos anteibat*, 1.87.2). As Otho's reign advances, bad men gain more power as the good men lose it. Indeed, the last sentence of Book 1 indicates that Otho leaves the city in the hands of his brother Titianus (1.90.3). As Book 2 will prove, Titianus is in no way an adequate leader.

Book 2 begins with a focus on the East and Vespasian, and Otho is not seen again until 2.11. Tacitus writes that "fortune shined on his undertakings" (*blandiebatur coeptis fortuna*, 2.12.1), but shortly thereafter, more incompetent Othonian commanders are introduced: Pacensis was chained by his mutinous men, Novello had no authority, and Clemens was ruling for popularity, did not enforce discipline and was greedy for battle (2.12.1).

Otho himself does not appear often in Book 2, and with matters given over to such powerless leaders, it does not take long for the troops to adopt a mind of their own. They devastate, loot, and burn as if Italy were some foreign land (2.12.2), and they terrorize innocent people (2.13.1). When audacious soldiers are combined with commanders of questionable authority, the Othonians begin their downward spiral.

The first incident of this nature occurs at 2.18. Spurrinna holds his men inside the fortifications at Placentia as they anticipate Caecina's approach. The soldiers wish to fight, so they grab their equipment, threaten the officers, suspect treachery against Otho, and set out from Placentia in search of action (2.18.2). Ash identifies this mutiny as a "crucial yardstick" of the troop's growing loyalty for him. Fearing treachery against their emperor, they are willing to revolt against their commanders (1999.32).

Spurrinna is not able to keep order, so he plays along instead. When the men realize how vulnerable they are in the open, the centurions and tribunes point out the logic of Spurrinna's plan of staying at Placentia. Then Spurrinna himself, rather than reproaching his men, explains his strategy (2.19.2). Ash comments that Spurrinna, like Otho, is prudent about dispensing discipline, and the fact that he must explain himself "shows his fragile *auctoritas*" (2007.128). As Otho emphasized in his speech at 1.83, soldiers need not know their commander's every thought, but they should follow orders without question. This ideal of Otho's is achieved neither here with Spurrinna, nor anywhere else in Book 2.

Having satisfied their impetuous taste for action and realizing their folly, the men return to base. They are now less mutinous and more receptive of orders (*minus turbidos et imperia accipientis*, 2.19.2). Courage runs high in the soldiers, but their obedience needs to be reinforced (2.19.2).

Spurinna's situation may have been resolved without much harm done, but soon the soldiers become more anxious, suspicious, and unrestrained. The commanders lose more authority, and Otho places more trust in the bad than in the good. Annius Gallus tries to bring aid to Spurinna at Placentia when his men, out of a desire to fight, progress towards mutiny (*usque ad seditionem*, 2.23.2). Gallus is able to somehow stop them, but Tacitus does not tell us how. Such a brief, vague description of a (hardly) mutinous episode seems almost unnecessary, unless it is meant to presage and thus emphasize Macer's subsequent ordeal.

Although Macer is somewhat successful near Cremona, he prevents his men from pursuing the retreating Vitellians in case reinforcements arrive. The scene shows many characteristics of Otho's ruin: the commanders try to control their eager troops (*repressus vincentium impetus*), while the troops suspect and question their commanders (*suspectum id Othonianis fuit, omnia ducum facta prave aestimantibus*). Once the commanders are accused, sedition is attempted both openly and secretly. Otho gives ear to the lowly and fears the respectable (2.23.3-5). The Othonian hierarchy quickly crumbles.

Suetonius Paulinus deals with a similar situation at 2.26. He destroys and routs Caecina's men, then signals his troops to stay back. Like Macer, he fears Vitellian reinforcements will arrive and defeat his tired soldiers. Some say that Caecina could have been crushed completely if Paulinus had not held back (*ut deleri cum universo exercitu Caecinam potuisse, ni Suetonius Paulinus receptui cecinisset, utrisque in partibus percrebuerit*, 2.26.2), and this caused negative gossip among the multitude (*in vulgus adverso rumore fuit*, 2.26.2).

Although the army of Vitellius falls outside the scope of this study, the Vitellians play a role in the events of Otho's attempt to maintain authority. In addition to Suetonius' problems, the beginning of 2.26 mentions the mutiny of those left in the Vitellian camp, and the imprisonment

of two brothers, one in each camp, on charges of treachery (2.26.1). Caecina accuses his men of being prepared for mutiny rather than battle (2.27.1). Then in a flashback, Tacitus narrates an earlier mutiny against Valens. This narration carries through 2.29, and shares many characteristics with the Othonian disturbances, including bold soldiers (2.27.2) who criticize their commander (2.28) and attack him (2.29). In the end, the soldiers regret their actions and become obedient (2.29.2). The commander does not engage in much discipline, but plays along with the troops (2.29.3). This chaotic episode, placed among the Othonian difficulties, emphasizes the idea of the turbulent commander/soldier relationship, and increases the intensity of the surrounding narratives. Though Tacitus says he delayed his account of the mutiny against Valens lest he interrupt the order of Caecina's situation (2.27.2), he no doubt realized the compound effect he would create by positioning it among such military disorder.⁹

When focus returns to the Othonians, strife is growing rapidly among the commanders. Suetonius Paulinus, because he was the most experienced in military affairs, offers his strategic advice and recommends delay for Otho's men. Celsus and Gallus agree with him (2.33.1), but Otho, Titianus, and Proculus are impatient for battle. The two latter men resort to flattery (*in adulationem concesserant*, 2.33.1), and Paulinus and Celsus are thereafter afraid to assert themselves. Otho takes the advice of his brother and Proculus (*deterioris consilii auctores*, 2.33.2) and retires to Brixillum, diminishing the spirit of the troops as a result. The drop in morale shows how attached the Othonians have grown to their emperor, but this deep affection alone does not destroy them. According to Ash, "what proves deadly is the fact that it is combined with a deep hatred of their officers" (1999.33). In one powerful statement, Tacitus

⁹ Ash explores other possible reasons for Tacitus' placement of the mutiny against Valens, but focuses more on the relationship between Caecina and Valens (2007.150).

blatantly states that the hierarchy of command is completely shattered at this point: “the commanders were suspected and Otho, whom alone the soldiers trusted, while he himself trusted no one except the soldiers, had left the authority of his commanders in question” (*suspecti duces et Otho, cui uni apud militem fides, dum et ipse non nisi militibus credit, imperia ducum in incerto reliquerat*, 2.33.3). Tacitus uses words like *fides* and *credit* to show the bonds of trust in Otho’s hierarchy, but ultimately we see words of abandonment and uncertainty (*in incerto reliquerat*).

When the bonds between troops and leaders are so severed, success in battle can hardly be expected. Eventually, the Othonians fight their own commanders more fervently than they fight the Vitellians (Ash 1999.33). Macer and his gladiators suffer a grievous defeat which worsens Macer’s image (2.35.2).¹⁰ After the battle, they damn their wounded leader and threaten him with their swords (2.36.1), and Macer is saved only by the intervention of the tribunes and centurions. The soldiers are happy when Otho sends Flavius Sabinus as a replacement commander, but the commanders themselves scorn their precarious positions (2.36.2). The danger of mutiny is constant.

As the suspense towards the first battle at Bedriacum builds, Tacitus reviews the Othonian miscalculations and mishaps to date. Ash very aptly writes, “In this chapter T. methodically analyses the military hierarchy, from Otho at the top, down to the common soldiers, relentlessly identifying the problems at each level. It is like watching a car crash in slow motion” (2007.184). Bad men hold the authority while good men are ignored (*spretis melioribus deterrimi valebant*, 2.39.1). With Otho withdrawn to Brixillum, Titianus holds *honor imperii*, but Proculus holds the *vis ac potestas*. Both are incompetent compared to Celsus and Paulinus, but the experience of

¹⁰ “Macer may not be that culpable: he showed apt caution by only deploying the *promptissimi gladiatorum* (2.35.1), reserving the others in case the Vitellians crossed the river” (Ash 2007.175).

these latter two men remains unused, and their positions as leaders are vain (*prudentia eorum nemo uteretur, inani nomine ducum alienae culpa praetendebantur*, 2.39.1). The tribunes and centurions also are paralyzed as leaders, and they remain at a loss. Enthusiastic soldiers will not follow orders: “the soldiery was eager, yet they preferred to interpret their generals’ orders to suit their own purposes, rather than to carry them out” (*miles alacer, qui tamen iussa ducum interpretari quam exequi mallet*, 2.39.1, tr. Ash 2007.185); organization is haphazard; the men respect only their emperor: “the soldiers demanded that the emperor be present at the battle” (*militibus ut imperator pugnae adesset poscentibus*, 2.39.2). Otho may be good for morale, yet his strategy and counsel are counterproductive. He first pushes for a hasty battle, but this causes more dissidence among the officers. Celsus and Paulinus do not want to risk an encounter with the Vitellians until their troops are rested and organized, but Titianus and Proculus, “when they were beaten in counsel, sided with the orders of the emperor” (*ubi consiliis vinceretur, ad ius imperii transibant*, 2.40.1).¹¹ Otho sends a messenger *atrocibus mandatis*, and as Ash notes, “Otho’s harsh directives trigger a *bellum atrox* (2.46.3) whose gory aftermath will be an *atrox spectaculum* (2.70.1)” (2007.187). The impatient emperor accuses his leaders of dragging their feet and orders them to act (2.40.1). Thus when the Othonians enter the battle, all levels of the hierarchy are dysfunctional.

The effects of Otho’s push are immediate: at 2.41 two officers ask to meet with Caecina (Ash 2007.187-8), perhaps with thoughts of treachery. The battle starts before this meeting can take place, and the remainder of 2.41 focuses on the complete disorder of the Othonians. Tacitus

¹¹ Ash notes “*vinco* in non-military contexts is common, but is ironic here, since the ‘victory’ of Titianus and Proculus will soon lead to military defeat” (2007.187).

first sets up a contrast: the Vitellians arrange themselves for battle *sine trepidatione*. Then, in a fury of jumbled words, Tacitus describes the fearful, jumbled Othonians:

apud Othonianos pavidi duces, miles ducibus infensus, mixta vehicula et lixae, et praeruptis utrimque fossis via quieto quoque agmini angusta. Circumsistere alii signa sua, quaerere alii; incertus undique clamor adcurrentium, vocantium: ut cuique audacia vel formido, in primam postremamve aciem prorumpabant aut relabebantur. (2.41.3)

Among the Othonians the leaders were terrified, the soldiers were hostile to their leaders, carriages and camp followers were mixed in, and the road, with steep ditches on both sides, was narrow even for an orderly column. Some gathered around their own standard, others searched for theirs. The uncertain cries of men running and calling out came from all directions: according to the fear or courage of each, men rushed towards the front line or fell to the back.

The commanders are fearful, the soldiers are disobedient, the terrain is far from ideal, and everyone is out of place. As the battle rages forward at 2.42, the Othonians are bewildered and frightened, but they turn joyful with false rumors of treachery and desertion against Vitellius. The troops have no idea what is going on, and they have no one to direct them. Throughout the course of the battle, none of the Othonian commanders are mentioned except in flight (2.44). Leadership is completely absent, and at 2.43.1-2 Tacitus sets up another contrast: Otho's commanders have long fled while Valens and Caecina strengthen their men with reinforcements (*et ducibus Othonis iam pridem profugis Caecina ac Valens subsidiis suos firmabant*). The Othonian troops are on their own, and it is almost embarrassing that the men who gain attention are from the *prima Adiutrix*. They are eager and fierce, but inexperienced; they have some initial success, but then are slaughtered. Their officer Orfidius Benignus, shamefully enough, is the only Othonian leader mentioned by name during the height of the battle.

Only after the Othonian loss and retreat to Bedriacum do we hear about the other commanders.¹² Paulinus and Proculus make their escape at 2.44.1, Titianus and Celsus at 2.44.2. Vedius Aquila falls prey to mutinous troops and suffers abuse not for any faults of his own, but because the soldiers needed someone to blame (2.44.1). Annius Gallus is actually able to calm some men by counsel, entreaties, and authority (*consilio precibus auctoritate*, 2.44.2), but the praetorians refuse to admit defeat. On the next day, only the soldiers are left to do the decision-making, and ambassadors are sent to the Vitellians (2.45.2).

Once the troops are reunited with Otho, some hope seems to return. Yet Otho, as before, has no real advantage to offer them. The next several chapters reveal the esteem the soldiers have developed for their emperor. They exhibit *ardor*, encourage him, and say they will do whatever it takes to prevail. Some stretch their hands out to him and beg him not to give up.¹³ He certainly has an emotional hold on them, since they reflect his demeanor (*ut flexerat vultum aut induraverat Otho, clamor et gemitus*, 2.46.3).

Otho seems to return the admiration. He refuses to continue the war and risk their lives in place of his (2.48.1). Indeed, he is depicted with imperial dignity at the end:

talia locutus, ut cuique aetas aut dignitas, comiter appellatos, irent propere neu remanendo iram victoris asperarent, iuvenes auctoritate, senes precibus movebat, placidus ore, intrepidus verbis, intempestivas suorum lacrimas coercens. (2.48.1)¹⁴

¹² “The Othonian generals suddenly re-enter the narrative just when the battle is over, though T. damningly fails to name them during the fighting itself” (Ash 2007.195).

¹³ “Keitel notes that having soldiers exhorting their generals, rather than the opposite, dramatizes the reversal of authorities attending civil war” (Manolaraki 2003.77).

¹⁴ “Otho’s sensitivity to the social hierarchy around him emphasizes his wasted potential” (Ash 2007.207). Too bad Otho could not put this same sensitivity, authority, and imperial dignity towards the military hierarchy.

Having said such things, according to the age and rank of each, they were addressed courteously, that they should go quickly lest they aggravate the anger of the victor by remaining, he moved the young men with his authority, the old men by entreaties; his expression was calm, his speech was undaunted, checking the untimely tears of his friends.

Otho's authority is ironically at its height. He has won over all his men, and they listen to his wishes. Even when a small mutiny erupts at 2.49 against Verginius and those departing, his word (all it takes is an ablative absolute) instantly stops their commotion (*increpitis seditionis auctoribus regressus*, 2.49.1).¹⁵ Shortly thereafter they commit the supreme act of fidelity towards him. Alongside his pyre, soldiers kill themselves "in emulation of his dignity and out of affection for their emperor" (*aemulatione decoris et caritate principis*, 2.49.4).¹⁶ Their attachment to Otho has deepened so much that it becomes utterly self-destructive (Ash 1999.34).

With Otho dead and the commanders absent, all authority over the Othonian troops is lost. The men quickly rise in mutiny, supposedly out of their grief and pain (2.51.1). They attack Verginius again at 2.51.1, although he manages to escape. At 2.52.1, they cast suspicions onto the senate: "they believed that the senate was hostile towards Otho" (*infensum Othoni senatum arbitrabantur*) and begin to watch their every move (*custodire sermones, vultum habitumque trahere in deterius*). And so the hierarchy continues to malfunction even after Otho's death.

Otho loses authority, then, in a way that is quite different from Galba. Whereas Galba loses authority primarily through his own faults and misdeeds, Otho loses it through the breakdown of a chain of command. Perhaps Otho could have taken some preventative measures to keep that chain intact, but ultimately he required the cooperation of the soldiers, the senate,

¹⁵ Manolaraki asserts that this mutiny is against Otho's decision to give up on the war. Their love for Otho presses them to step out of line, which "leaves us in doubt about the moral legitimacy of mutinies" (2003.76-9).

¹⁶ Indeed, 2.54.2 labels Otho's death as *laudabilior*.

tribunes and centurions, generals, together with himself if his authority were to be preserved. Yet because the military hierarchy failed to coalesce across all these levels, the Othonians suffered defeat with their emperor.

We are now in a position to see how Tacitus as an author goes about narrating these challenges to unstable authority, and whether the content of *Histories* 1 and 2 has any bearing on the way Tacitus narrates these events. In a world where authority is so dreadfully unstable, how can we trust a historian to relate the story accurately?

CHAPTER 4 THE AUTHORITY OF TACITUS

How Does Tacitus Strive to Establish Authority?

In a work so focused on individuals struggling to gain power, it is quite appropriate that Tacitus begins by exerting his own authority and firmly establishing his position as a historian. As Damon points out, his very first line links him with the annalistic tradition (2003.77) and links him to the venerable historians of the Republican period, those who (according to Tacitus) wrote *pari eloquentia ac libertate* (1.1.1). Likewise, he becomes “a member of that distinguished company of Senator-historians, and by implication, that long line of *magna ingenia*” (Marincola 1997.144). Thus Tacitus distinguishes these historians from those who wrote after Actium, those who were less concerned with truth and politics, but more concerned with flattery and odium. Tacitus is not one of these. In fact, he claims to be a neutral writer (*mihi Galba Otho Vitellius nec beneficio nec iniuria cogniti*, 1.1.3), as well as an honest one, since he admits his debt to Vespasian and his sons (*dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito auctam, a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim*, 1.1.3). Yet there is something almost contradictory in Tacitus’ statements. Impartiality and *dignitas* are difficult to claim simultaneously, since part of asserting *dignitas* involves naming one’s connections.¹ Tacitus wants to assert *beneficia* without bias (Marincola 1997.166). So to avoid the appearance of flattery and reassure his audience, he claims neutrality through a generalized statement: “anyone professing genuine honesty must speak neither with affection nor with hate” (*sed incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est*, 1.1.3). Thus, his prime concern, weaving impartiality with social status (Marincola 1997.144), seems to be delivered intact.

¹ “It is noteworthy that by Tacitus’ time the historian will need to aver impartiality even for a non-contemporary history...The belief that all historians wrote out of fear or favour must have become deeply engrained” (Marincola 1997.166).

Tacitus then changes the subject slightly, saying that he plans to write about the reigns of Nerva and Trajan during his old age. Not only is this topic richer, but safer, “due to the rare happiness of the times, when it is permitted to feel what you want and to say what you feel” (*rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*, 1.1.4).² Marincola argues that this statement allows Tacitus to bring his assertion of authority full circle. Tacitus has *rara felicitas* which will allow him to write good history and be impartial like those historians who wrote *pari eloquentia ac libertate*. “In a kind of ring-composition, Tacitus strengthens here the generalized assertion of impartiality made in the previous sentence” (Marincola 1997.167). By categorizing himself thus with trustworthy writers living during good times, Tacitus establishes his authority as a historian.³

At 2.101, Tacitus reinforces this message, but here, he claims his place among the crowd of historians not by comparing himself to good writers, but contrasting himself with bad ones. The writers of the time wrote in flattery (*scriptores temporum...corruptas in adulationem causas, tradidere*, 2.101.1). Ash comments that Tacitus uses these words “to assert his independence as a historian...T. will give his own opinions and is not dependent on what the *scriptores temporum* hand down to posterity” (2007.379). He sets himself further apart from these men by beginning his next sentence with a first person pronoun, *nobis*. According to Ash, this word allows “self promotion”. Tacitus is attempting “to set himself up...as a ‘lone voice’ against a large body of writers” (2007.380). Then, by revealing their ambition and envy (*aemulatione etiam invidiaque*, 2.101.1) as if a prosecutor, he removes the possibility of being

² Tacitus, like Sallust, “sees the ideal historian as one not beholden to the interests of those in power” (Marincola 1997.167).

³ As Damon comments, Tacitus leaves out some expected *topoi* here, including an expression of fear over the reception of his work (2003.77). This omission, if interpreted as a show of confidence, may also help Tacitus build authority, but Damon says “reticence is a mark of T’s historiographical style” (2003.77).

named guilty himself. With these thoughts, Tacitus brings his reader back to his very first chapter: “This digressive close to the book develops T.’s opening discussion (1.1.1-2) about the pitfalls of imperial historiography, especially his point that authors who flatter expose themselves to the degrading charge of slavishness” (Ash 2007.379). Tacitus makes sure he secures his place as a good historian and leaves another reminder of his *auctoritas*.

What Authority Does Tacitus Manage to Gain?

Having aligned himself with the illustrious Republican writers, Tacitus then must prove his right to the position. He seems to uphold his claim of honest reporting by keeping his own voice out of the narrative. Tacitus rarely interrupts the flow of his history to offer personal remarks, and thus makes it easier for the audience to visualize the story for themselves rather than through a writer. The historical middle-man is camouflaged to make the narrative appear less tampered-with and more truthful. So Tacitus gains authority by avoiding direct authorial statements, since these can often appear forceful or biased.

The very few times Tacitus does use his own voice, then, are of great importance. In Book 1, he uses the first person only once, at 1.18: *nocuit antiquus rigor et nimia severitas, cui iam pares non sumus*. With the plural *sumus*, Tacitus appears to express his views while simultaneously identifying himself with some group (Romans, men of senatorial rank) which presumably holds these same views. In his book *Tacitus the Sententious Historian*, Sinclair explains that the use of “we” helps Tacitus “present himself and his reader as ‘like-minded comrades-in-arms’.” He continues to say that “First person plural verbs, pronouns, and possessive adjectives draw the reader into an implicit alliance with Tacitus” (1995.53).⁴ So when

⁴ Although Sinclair’s *Tacitus the Sententious Historian* focuses on *Annales 1-6*, many of his comments are applicable here.

Tacitus asserts his authority and says that Galba met his ruin because he was unbearable to all, the force of the first person verb compels the reader to buy into his words.

Tacitus uses the first person much more assertively in Book 2. Perhaps at this time he feels more confident about the establishment of his authority, or perhaps the subject matter simply strikes his mind a certain way and moves him differently. Whatever the case, Tacitus begins 2.37 boldly with *invenio*. He emerges from his camouflaged hideaway and puts himself at center-stage. Again, he defines himself in relation to other writers, in this case those biased by their emotions (*invenio apud quosdam auctores pavore belli seu fastidio utriusque principis*, 2.37.1). In addition, Ash comments that with this statement, “T. implies diligent consultation of multiple sources in an effort to enhance his historiographical *auctoritas*” (2007.177). Tacitus appears to be doing his best to discover the truth. He relates their version of the story, that the soldiers had debated ending the fighting and naming an emperor, and that Paulinus hoped to be chosen. But Tacitus is not like these historians, and he does not think like them. He contrasts himself and his opinions with an emphatic *ego*, conceding (first person singular *concesserim*) that although a few men may have wanted peace, Paulinus would not have held such a vain hope. The fact that Tacitus concedes slightly makes him appear reasonable and even trustworthy, qualities which help him gain further authority and confidence from his readers. Tacitus also is not afraid to assert his own belief openly, showing command of his arguments. He continues on with *reor*, expressing his lack of faith in the armies to establish a good emperor and in the generals to endure one.

Tacitus continues this vein of authorial expression into 2.38. Continuing his pessimism, he digresses about the greed for power and how it has affected Roman history over time. He concludes that the Othonians and Vitellians follow in the footsteps of so many others: “the same

wrath of the gods, the same madness of men, the same reasons for wickedness led them to discord” (*eadem illos deum ira, eadem hominum rabies, eadem scelerum causae in discordiam egere*, 2.38.2). This moralizing statement, tied with a remark about the worthlessness of the current emperors, brings a powerful close to Tacitus’ thoughts. He ends the chapter and his digression by returning to the first person (*sed me veterum novorumque morum reputatio longius tulit: nunc ad rerum ordinem venio*, 2.38.2), a reminder of his authority.⁵ His last word finalizes the excursion in a way that is strikingly similar to the way it began: *venio* as opposed to *invenio*. The digression initially unfolds with the compound form, thus recalling the act of inventing, such as an author molding a narrative. The simple form, on the other hand, connotes a return to stricter objectivity from the creative license of *invenio*. Tacitus moves full circle through his authorial interjection, then transitions back to the narrative.

Tacitus moves from causing almost no interference in the narrative to suddenly bursting onto the scene, reinforcing his authority and moralizing about the current situation. But why? It is worth citing Sinclair at length:

...he reserves this personal address for the digressive passages where he diverges from strict chronicling of events and sets out his views on various topics at greater length. These digressions are introduced into the narrative at crucial points where Tacitus must make certain that his reader has what he considers the proper historical perspective...He provides the reader with opportunities to react to him as historical narrator and to assess his judgment. (1995.59)

Indeed, it seems by this time in his narrative Tacitus has been saving up his words. When he finally requires a break “to challenge a report in his sources” (Ash 2007.176), he takes the opportunity to likewise strengthen his authority, position his story in the overall Roman context,

⁵ Ash notes that this sentence (*sed me...longius tulit*) is an apologetic formulae commonly seen in digressions (2007.183). Tacitus is playing the role of the proper historian.

and provide a moral gloss. As Sinclair points out above, it assures that everyone is on the same page before he moves on. Furthermore, the placement of his digression could not be better:

This is a well-timed reflective pause before the climactic account of the first battle at Bedriacum (2.39-45). Its advantages are clear: not only does T. heighten tension for his readers by delaying the miserable finale of Otho's principate, but he also enhances his own *auctoritas* as a historian (2.37) and satisfies the moralising agenda of ancient historiography (2.38). (Ash 2007.176)

With his authority secure and all loose ends tied, Tacitus can enter his battle narrative with assurance, focus, and anticipation.

What Causes Tacitus' Authority to Become Unstable?

Direct interruptions, or their opposites, impersonal phrases, can cause an author's authority to become unstable. These constructions can be risky, and Tacitus must be careful when using bold and abrupt authorial digressions. Ironically, such passages can either win authority or lose it, depending on whether the ideas are perceived as firm or forceful. If the reader feels that Tacitus is too forceful and crosses the line with excessive judgment, he may appear biased himself and lose his credibility. Yet Tacitus seems to hit the right mark and gain strength from his direct interlocutions. He is usually quite cautious about being too assertive, and is fond of using impersonal phrases to express himself mildly. He sometimes begins a thought with "it is uncertain..." (*incertum*, 1.23.1), "they say..." (*ferunt*, 1.17.1) or "it is said" (*dicitur*, 1.44.1), especially if he is introducing something he may not necessarily support in full. According to Marincola, these phrases help Tacitus "maintain the formal distance" and appear as the good historian striving for the truth (1995.95). They are also useful for offering various versions of a story. At 1.41, Tacitus relates the final words of the dying Galba through a great chain of such phrases (*prodidere...alii...paucos ...plures...non satis constat...tradidit...*, 1.41.2-3).⁶ In doing

⁶ Tacitus also uses this chapter as another opportunity to distinguish himself from the bad historians, those who write out of fear or admiration (*extremam eius vocem, ut cuique odium aut admiratio fuit, varie prodidere*, 1.42.2).

this, Tacitus can spice up his story of Galba's last moment with multiple exciting accounts, but he does not have to commit to any single version. Using these phrases to offer various versions also serves as "one of several ways that a historian wins credibility by the avoidance of omniscience and was a recognition too that in many matters...certainty was impossible" (Marincola 1995.94). Therefore, through his use of impersonal phrases at 1.41, Tacitus (as usual) accomplishes many things at once: he keeps his proper distance, appears prudent and honest, flavors his story, and avoids personal responsibility. Thus, although Tacitus' impersonal phrases may seem authoritatively weak on the surface, they are the opposite. Although direct interruptions may cause Tacitus to lose credibility should he cross the boundaries of decorum, he knows how to use just the right amount of assertion. Tacitus' authority does not become unstable, but remains everywhere intact.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

At the very heart of Tacitus' *Histories* lies a complex struggle over authority as it is initially gained, eagerly sought, achieved, and lost. In Book 1, we see Galba on the decline due primarily to character flaws, and we watch the *ignarus* old man vainly attempt to regain his footing. The very things which he hopes will help his situation (*severitas* and adoption of Piso) hasten his fall, while all other detriments go completely unnoticed. His *imperium* unravels strand by strand as the challenges to his unstable authority snowball into an overwhelming force. He ultimately fails as an emperor because of his inability to see his own mistakes and correct his grip on authority accordingly. In the end, Tacitus grants him the obituary of a tragic character, "happier in the reigns of others than in his own" (1.49.2).

With Otho we witness the full rise and fall of power. He gains *imperium* by being the opposite of Galba and more like Nero. He acts with generosity and engages in flattery, but he does not know how to engineer a strong chain of command. Strife grows among the generals as bad leaders gain power and good ones lose it. Dissension and mutiny abound when the soldiers develop overzealous loyalty towards Otho, but hatred towards their immediate officers. The broken bond between soldiers and leaders makes victory impossible, challenges Otho's unstable authority beyond tolerance, and causes his consequent ruin. His death is somewhat tragic also: with a calm demeanor he decides to end the war by ending his life, and thus to save his beloved soldiers (2.47.1). Ironically, many will take their own lives out of grief for their emperor (2.49.4).

So whereas Galba's authority becomes unstable primarily due to his own errors, Otho fails more indirectly, falling prey the dysfunctional nature of the chain of command. The proper measure of authority eludes them both.

With such chaotic subject matter Tacitus' job as narrator is indeed challenging. Yet he establishes and maintains authority as a writer with masterful ease. He frames Books 1 and 2 with direct authorial statements, associating himself with good historians who write *pari eloquentia ac libertate* (1.1.1), and contrasting himself with bad historians who write *in adulationem* (2.101.1). Within this framework, he uses a mix of first person interjections, digressions, and impersonal statements to strike a delicate balance of authorial assertion, one that implies control of the narrative without seeming overbearing. Although he writes about unstable authority, Tacitus' own authority is fully secure.

From the examination of this material, we can see that stable authority not only requires some favorable character traits and the ability to construct strong support from a chain of command, but it also requires knowledge of those who have successfully held authority in the past and the ability to follow in their tracks. These are the very lessons history strives to teach, and Tacitus successfully communicates them through Galba, Otho, and himself.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Megan M. Daly was born January 6, 1984. She grew up in Orland Park, Illinois, but moved to Winter Haven, Florida, when she was 14. She graduated from Lake Region High School in 2002 and began classes at the University of Florida that August. She thereafter realized her love for classics and art history and has been studying it eagerly ever since. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in 2006 and was honored as a valedictorian of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. After attending a life-changing session of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens that summer, Megan entered the master's program at UF. Today she continues to devote her life to classics through her course work, research, and teaching.