Fact and the Morality of Leaders in Tacitus’ *Annals*

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This summer I studied the work of Cornelius Tacitus, the greatest Roman historian. I focused on his *Annals*, specifically on the section about the emperor Tiberius, Books I-VI. Objective analysis reveals that Tiberius was in fact a fairly successful emperor, and certainly not a detriment to Roman strength in the world. Tacitus, however, depicts a bloodthirsty tyrant who inspired fear and hatred in Rome—but at the same time quietly acknowledges the prudence of Tiberius’ rule. My question, then, was how to understand these contrasting characters, and what Tacitus’ account can tell us about that era and his own.

I started my research with a study of the life of Tiberius. Because Tacitus is a major source for this period, gaining a more complete picture of the emperor through other means was necessary to understand what is unique about Tacitus’ account. I drew from both primary and secondary sources, and was able to form my own opinion about the emperor’s strengths, weaknesses, policies, and the like. Returning to the text, I compared what Tacitus had to say about these same issues, and identified areas that seemed particularly interesting. More often than not, these areas drew my attention because of Tacitus’ negative stance towards what appeared to be positive aspects of Tiberius’ reign.

A high level of bias pervades Tacitus’ work. I spent some time studying how he created such a negative image of Tiberius, while at the same time largely staying within the realm of fact. Tacitus’ masterful use of innuendo is deployed full force in the first six books of the *Annals*. I gained tremendous insight into the linguistic tools used to create such forceful rhetoric, and deepened my understanding of the care and exactness with which ancient authors worked. I also gained an appreciation for the subtle and sometimes sinister ways that bias can creep into writing, a lesson applicable not only to ancient texts but to any source; my work demanded extremely critical reading.

Finally, I turned to the question of what Tacitus was trying to say. To answer this, I looked at the society he lived in and wrote about, and also searched his other writings for recurrent themes or analogues to the *Annals*. It is also important to remember that Tacitus wrote within an existing tradition of Roman historiography, and was undoubtedly influenced by earlier authors. I plan to continue exploring this question in my upcoming honors project, and have built an excellent foundation for further study. Classics is a large field, and this summer afforded me a great opportunity to focus in on the aspects of the discipline most relevant to my independent study, and allowed me to begin the year with a clear understanding of the work still ahead of me.

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