

## Characterization in Germanicus' Dying Speech

Scholars have interpreted Tacitus' Germanicus as anything from a brilliant hero to an incompetent fool, and any combination of the two (Williams 2009, fn. 1 provides a summary). I examine Germanicus' dying speech at *Annals* 2.71-2 for insight into Tacitus' portrayal of Germanicus and conclude that Tacitus gives Germanicus a well-crafted but unpersuasive dying speech that directs readers to discount Germanicus' personal charisma and focus on his incomprehension of the principate as it existed under Tiberius. Germanicus' death scene reinforces Tacitus' portrayal of Germanicus as emotive, family-centered, and oblivious to imperial family politics. Germanicus' analysis of his own death is informed more by personal enmity and by the unfairness of his untimely death than it is by the complex grievances within the imperial family that could have set Tiberius against him. Tacitus does not clearly exonerate either Piso or Tiberius, but he organizes Germanicus' final speech as he has organized his earlier ones (for example, during the troop mutiny at 1.42-33) to be beautiful, dramatic, and unpersuasive.

Germanicus died after coming into conflict with Calpurnius Piso, the governor of Syria, who was later charged with Germanicus' murder. Tacitus is cagey about Piso's culpability, but Germanicus is not in any doubt (Shotter 208). Although Germanicus does not explain how Piso and Plancina could have accomplished his death, he accuses them by name. I suggest that Germanicus' deathbed accusation actually substantiates Tacitus' equivocation about the cause of Germanicus' death because the speech casts Germanicus as likeable but so out-of-genre as to be disconnected from reality. Germanicus names his murderer, yet Tacitus' readers cannot believe him because of the way Tacitus presents his speech.

Germanicus' farewell to his family evokes tragedy more than it does politics. Besides Piso and Plancina, Germanicus blames fate and the gods for his death: "if I were succumbing to fate, my indignation even at the gods would be justified, for snatching me—in my youth, by a premature departure—from parents, children, and fatherland," (all translations from Woodman 2004, *si fato concederem, iustus mihi dolor etiam adversus deos esset, quod me parentibus liberis patriae intra iuventiam praemature exitu raperent*, 2.71.1). Germanicus follows up his claim that Piso and Plancina are responsible for his death with a request that his family "relay to my father and brother the embitterments with which I have been tormented, the snares by which I have been surrounded, as I end my most pitiable life by the worst of deaths" (*referatis patri ac fratri, quibus acerbitatibus dilaceratus, quibus insidiis circumventus miserrimam vitam pessima morte finerim*, 2.71.1). Here, Germanicus accuses abstract culprits for his death: fate and the gods, as well as Piso and Plancina. Germanicus' instructions for vengeance appear vague in light of the expanded list of culprits, and he focuses more attention on his misery than on the heinousness of any alleged murderers.

Additionally, Germanicus' complaints and recommendations are unsuited to his political situation. Germanicus' emphasis on family is not the advantage he seems to think it is. He presents himself first and foremost as a family man by appealing to the grief his immediate family will suffer at his death, but he underestimates the possibility that his membership in the imperial family might pose a threat to Tiberius. When discussing his public role, Germanicus defines his accomplishments through his wife and children: "show to the Roman people the granddaughter of the Divine Augustus, who is likewise my spouse; count out our six children" (*ostendite populo Romano divi Augusti neptem eandemque coniugem meam, numerate sex liberos*, 2.71.4). His large, bereft family ought to inspire pity (or vengeance), but their pity would

not have endeared them to Tiberius. Tacitus portrays Tiberius as suspicious of Germanicus (Shotter 194), and Germanicus' flaunting of his relationship to Augustus would have exacerbated that tension. Germanicus does not appear to have realized that if Tiberius opposes him, it is because of their close family relationship, not despite it.

Germanicus' dying speech, therefore, reveals his lack of insight into politics and therefore does not present a credible accusation against Piso. Although Tacitus allows Germanicus to name Piso, he simultaneously undermines Germanicus' credibility as a political thinker by reporting this highly emotional and slightly naïve speech. Germanicus might have warned his wife Agrippina against Tiberius (2.72.1), but Tacitus does not emphasize that possibility. Instead, Tacitus encourages his readers to look beyond Germanicus' charisma to his poor analysis of his circumstances. Tacitus' Germanicus is likeable and inspiring, but out of his depth, and Tacitus repeatedly demonstrates his deficits through his rhetoric.

#### Select Bibliography

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